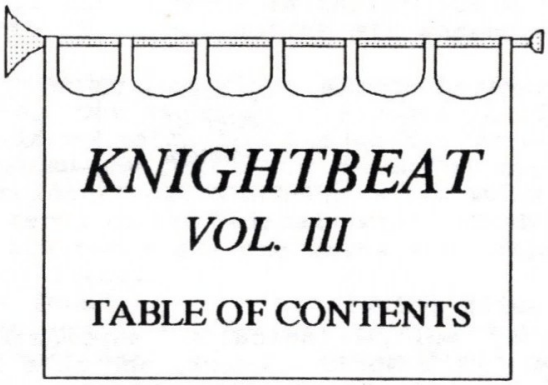
KNIGHTBEAT





KNIGHTBEAT
VOL. III

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COVER *Frank V. Liltz*

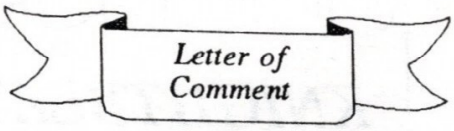
LETTER OF COMMENT 2
FIRST BLOOD *Denysé M. Bridger* .. 5
CASE FILE #13 *Pam Jensen* . 18
JANETTE EXPLAINS *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 19
BY VIRTUE OF NECESSITY *Winifred McBeth* . 20
CAPTAIN'S LAMENT *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 41
LISA *Pam Jensen* . 42
DEAD, WHITE, EUROPEAN MALES *Winifred McBeth* . 43
NO OTHER WAY *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 44
LOST CRUSADER *Ellen M. "Blade" McMicking* . 50
IN SHINING ARMOR *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 51
A LADY'S PLEDGE *Ellen M. "Blade" McMicking* . 52
HOPE *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 54
FADED MEMORIES *Pam Jensen* . 55
PARTNERS *Kathleen Y. Bergeron* . 56
OBSESSIONS *Denysé M. Bridger* . 57

Prepared For FENRIS HOUSE by Denysé M. Bridger
and Annette Freisinger

EDITOR: Barbara Fister-Liltz

KNIGHTBEAT: VOL. III ((c))copyright 1993 by Fenris House, a Division of SPECIAL SERVICES Unlimited. Artwork ((c)) copyright 1994 by Frank V. Liltz. No part of this book may be reproduced in part or whole without the express written permission of the authors, artists, and/or Fenris House, the publisher. This is an amateur publication created solely for the enjoyment of the fans of **FOREVER KNIGHT**, and does not pretend to infringe upon copyrights held by Paragon Productions, James D. Parriott, CBS-TV, Tristar Television, or any other holder of above forementioned copyrights.

FENRIS HOUSE *Special Services Unlimited*
8601A West Cermak Road, North Riverside, IL, 60546-1225
U.S.A.



It's Wednesday, well, technically I suppose it's actually Thursday, March 10th, 1994 -- the world is dark, and it's late -- **VERY** late!

As I lie here in my irritating and quite unwanted solitude, tucked between the decadent beauty of black sheets (with a cheery floral splash tossed in to ease the darkness, naturally!), I find that I am feeling both whimsical and verbose. I would dearly love to tell you something scintillating and witty, but alas, the remaining two brain cells that function are asleep at this time. Thus, you will have to endure my mindless babble. Call it a punishment, if you will -- knowing you as I do, I am certain if you've not yet committed some act deserving a penance, you soon will. You, my dear, are one of the more consistent delights in my life! **sigh**

Oh, to be able to tell you that I wait upon my Master's pleasure -- immoral slut that I am -- but, you'd recognise the lie for what it was. (Immoral slut that you are!) Still, all is not lost, and we shall find amusement without HIM.

I've decided to take this wonderful, intimate time we're sharing to tell you about a delectable little book that I've recently acquired! Oh, do be still, this is something that will interest you if you will give me a few minutes.

First, you will simply die for this cover! The Master and that wretched boy he prizes so highly. Now, I realise Nicholas is a pretty child, and I'm sure he's a tasty little thing, too, but . . . that attitude! If he were anybody else . . . Well, we know, don't we? Back to the charming volume that keeps me amused in HIS absence. (He's probably hunting down that equally pretty 'replacement' I've been reading about, but I am getting ahead of myself in my agitation.) Let us begin at the beginning, n'est-ce pas?

ANOTHER PLACE & TIME: An arresting opening piece. This Gabrielle Sinclaire is a rather unusual harlot, but clearly just another trashy tidbit for the Master's insatiable hungers. Still, I suspect this creature will be around for some time yet, he appears to have a purpose in mind for her! Poor Nicholas, if he would only come to his senses and put an end to this tiresome game he plays. Perhaps all our nights could be more pleasantly spent with this annoying impasse behind us? Ms. Sinclaire seems a willing servant to this edict. Does HE have this affect on all of us, or just those with the good sense to appreciate his. . . ah . . . talents? (That bears further thought, does it not?)

POETRY: They've included some divine bites of poetic whimsy. This Gillian Truscott clearly recognises a truly magnificent inspiration! Her *"Lover"* gave me a delightful shiver, followed swiftly by a pang of

loneliness. (I will not indulge in the choice words that pervade my mind at this moment! I do not suffer HIS absences at all well, some nights.)

SYDNEY'S TALE: An amusing view. The temperamental feline had best be careful in future. Our Nicholas is a noble child, but he is what he is -- and the cat is no match for the wolf! Arrogant little furball that he is, this *Sydney* may yet become a savoury appetizer! Of course, explaining this 'accident' could present a few awkward moments, and the silly creature who tends to the hairball will undoubtedly be most upset, but . . . (These are the risks one takes when allowing the Knight to become part of one's life!)

HEARTSONG: I found this an intriguing slice of Nicky's chosen life. The lovely cat-owner is somewhat enamoured of our errant knight, isn't she? And he with her. The Master will not be at all happy with this turn of events. (HE has been so irritable of late, what with his injuries not entirely healed and his mind in frequent disarray. Still, what HE doesn't know and all that . . .) It is so nice to see that Nicholas still pursues some of the more artistic aspects of his long life. The song is lovely, Nick. I hope she appreciates this time you have for her, because once you-know-who gets his shit together these romantic interludes may have to be set aside in favour of other more pressing things -- like continued survival! (As I said, HE is so irritable of late . . .)

BLOOD GAMES: A truly sick mind is at work here. Either that, or the Master has found a new hobby he has not shared with the rest of us. What a deliciously depraved reminiscence. But why the pen name? Why does he not simply speak for himself and let the chips fall where they may? I do not understand. But, as he is so fond of reminding me, it is not my function to question HIS reasons. (Come to think of it, his Royalness hasn't exactly been forthcoming about just what it is I am supposed to do for him?)

MORE POETICS: This Pam Jensen person has a fascinating, ingenious way with words. You will enjoy her. *"The Stalker"*, poor wretch, is no more. And you think the Master has no compassion! Did HE not help his child put an end to this one's mischief? Yet, no gratitude was expressed. No, only great personal injury was bestowed upon HIM for his assistance. (And, let me tell you, HE is so irritable since waking from that night . . . Try living with him! **shudder** It is not always pleasant, I assure you!) *"Aperitif"*; I love pre-dinner reparteé.

THICKER THAN WATER: Another look at Nicholas. A most engaging tale, too, I might add. This Doctor Brittington has the same odd notion as the pretty cat-fancier, this desire to cure our Nick of what he is! Such a silly scheme, but it seems to offer him comfort, so we won't deny him his fantasy. Janette, that little vixen, is up to her expected tricks. (A word to the wise, petite soeur, guard your back in the coming months! HE has a debt to settle with you, too.) But, getting back to this story, now; the entire affair had some wonderfully picturesque moments, and poor 'Jean Pierre' -- it was not a nice thing that this 'Henri' did to him. But, it ended well. And, I think the lesson was one that will not soon be forgotten.

HERO: An interesting choice of word to categorise one who destroys. But, "men on missions" have always been foolhardy and stubborn in their righteousness. (Perhaps it is a genetic flaw?) *Charles* was such a one. To have killed without conscience, even when mistaken, is (to my admittedly limited understanding of such things) one

of the mortal weaknesses that is least tolerated among any society. Still, this was a most enjoyable tale, and Nicholas, to his credit, did all he could to protect both the mortal he loves, and Janette -- whom we all adore, when the truth is told! I do hope her injury was not serious and she has fully recovered.

SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED: And I was worried about that raven-haired strumpet! She snaps back well, does our Janette. I must admit, this mystery man of hers is quite the enigmatic sort. How does one go about finding him? Forget, indeed!

GENESIS: This is the one I spoke of earlier. Apparently this winsome boy, Peter Caine, is being groomed as a replacement for our Nicholas. The story was most specific in that respect, I assure you. It does tend to make one wonder why we allow ourselves to be so carelessly used and discarded by His Royal Nastiness! (The Master is irrevocably despicable, but I adore him anyway. Such is the way of madness and obsession, I suppose.) The child, Caine, is learning that lesson the hard way, though. I could feel my own skin crawl when Nick dragged the poor fledgling into that horrible church and began to torture him. For his own good, of course. I wonder what this Peter would have responded to that, had any of these heartless saviours thought to ask for his opinion. A man should be allowed to decide these things for himself, c'est vrai? (I wonder if this escapade might help to explain HIS mood recently? He is so irritable of late . . .)

Well, dearest, that about covers the expected treats you can look forward to finding in KNIGHTBEAT Vol. II -- such a clever, imaginative title, isn't it? And, not a moment too soon, I might add. I hear his Lordship snarling about some little inconvenience that I am undoubtedly expected to "fix". So much for **my** plans, chéri -- I had hoped HIS foray into the night would put him in a better frame of mind. I get so weary, trying to find new ways to amuse him. It's always the same, he storms in with the scent of fresh blood on his lips and that disconcerting look of disdain in his dazzling gaze. **shiver**

Hmmm . . . I may have been wrong about HIS mood, I see. He's stripping out of that incredible cape and tux! My waiting may not have been in vain tonight!! Come now, you cannot possible deny me some benefit to this life of servitude I've chosen? Yes, I definitely misread the Master's mood, he's feeling somewhat playful tonight. I hope you'll understand why this must end quickly. He's already tossed the book and I fear my pen is about to meet a similar fate.

In a moment, my lord! I must sign off.

He is so irritable of late . . . And so divinely wicked!

Goodnight, chéri . . .

"Sleepless In Toronto"

FIRST BLOOD

by

Denysé M. Bridger

OCTOBER 7th, 1989: VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA ---

"LaCroix!"

The voice that echoed in the silent room was filled with terror and husky with recent misuse. The vampire hesitated before he closed the space that separated him from the woman who'd just cried his name so pitifully. He reached for her, pale fingers brushing soothingly across her forehead, and when wide grey eyes opened and stared up at him, he smiled.

"Welcome home, Gabrielle," he whispered, his voice like silk as he bent to place a cool kiss on her parted lips.

"Home?"

There was a world of confusion in the single word and she tried desperately to clear the fog from her mind. She felt weak and frightened, though she could not recall why either emotion should be so strong. She looked into the piercing blue eyes that regarded her so calmly, and the whisper of a smile curved her lips. She remembered him, little else was clear, but she knew this man.

"How did you come to be here, LaCroix?"

"Your memory will return, Gabrielle," he assured her. "All of it will be clear to you once you adjust to your new life."

Her stomach rumbled and she put a hand on her abdomen, feeling the sense of hunger that lingered but had somehow changed from what she was used accustomed to.

"I feel so different. Why?"

"You are part of me now," he replied with a warmth that made her tremble visibly.

"I'm hungry," she murmured. She glanced around the room, but did not see her surroundings as she searched for something she couldn't even name. "Please, help me?" She turned huge grey eyes to him, the plea repeated in their dazed depths.

"Do you know where you are, Gabrielle?" LaCroix asked, as he stroked soft auburn hair from her forehead. When she offered no response to his enquiry, he nodded. "I will help you. You are mine." He was mildly surprised when the words lit her eyes with emotion.

"I belong to no man, LaCroix," she murmured, in an irritated manner. The magnitude was shocking. "I never have," she added. She

was furious with him, enraged by the mocking laughter her words evoked.

"You, Gabrielle, have belonged to me for an eternity," he equalled her anger, but his was vastly more dangerous. "And you will do my bidding, pet. You will even beg for my favour afterward."

Gabrielle felt another swell of rage course through her, which was enhanced by the fierce hunger that wracked her body. She pushed herself off the bed, but collapsed when her feet touched the floor.

LaCroix watched her fall, with a bored expression. He offered no assistance until she started to shake, and to utter tiny whimpers of pain. He knelt beside her and drew her into his arms, whispering softly to her. He smiled as her body curled into his, her arms clung to him with a strength that was desperate.

"I'm afraid," she admitted with mounting terror. She leaned closer to him, and felt the hunger grow to near maddening ferocity. Instinct drew her to his neck. She kissed the cool, smooth skin, her tongue caressed his flesh as she moaned with the sensation of passion. She shuddered as she felt fangs emerge and she opened her mouth. Before she could do more, LaCroix's hand jerked her head back by her hair.

"Not yet, Gabrielle," he told her with a smile that held both pleasure and compassion. "Not until you've fed properly."

Gabrielle stared at him, drowned in the glittering blue of his eyes. Her emotions seemed to rise and fall like a tidal wave, barely within her control. She loved him. She hated him. She wanted him. She needed him.

LaCroix watched the turmoil in her eyes, felt every shift of her mind as clearly as if she'd spoken each thought. She was his, completely and irrevocably. He sensed no power within her, no vision. Masquing his disappointment, he drew her to her feet and led her again to the bed. He sat her on the edge and stepped back, watching the hunger distort her beauty as it took hold of her body. For several moments, he wondered if she'd dare to attack him.

"Please, LaCroix?"

The request was a breathy plea, torn from a part of the soul that she no longer had.

He touched her cheek, slender pale fingers lingered over cool skin with exquisite gentleness. He nodded and stepped back, and disappeared into the shadows. His smile was filled with satisfaction as he opened the bedroom door and pulled the restless youth into the room.

The scent of warm blood filled Gabrielle's senses and the hunger gnawed her insides with greater intensity. She turned to watch LaCroix return, a young man at his side. The boy's heartbeat pounded like a beacon to her, and she held out her hand, the invitation unmistakable.

"I told you she was beautiful," LaCroix breathed into to the boy's ear. The kid looked at him, his expression openly disdainful as he gave the vampire a thorough examination and clearly found the older man lacking. LaCroix's expression remained unaffected -- only his eyes gleamed his amusement at the boy's impudence.

"If you wanna watch, man, that'll cost you extra," the young man snapped with a mocking snort of laughter.

Before LaCroix could offer him an answer of any kind, Gabrielle leapt forward. The suddenness of her attack brought a spurt of delighted laughter from LaCroix. He sat on the bed and awaited her.

"Get this bitch off me, man!" the kid shouted, as he tried to squirm out from under Gabrielle.

Before he could say more, Gabrielle knotted her hands in his hair

and yanked, pulling his head to one side with a strength that snapped his neck with the audible crack of dislocating bones. As the last breath passed his lips, she sank her fangs deep into his throat. The bittersweet taste of warm blood filled her mouth and she drank greedily. She gorged herself on LaCroix's gift. The boy's life seemed to hum in her veins and she felt new desires stir with each drop of precious blood she consumed.

When she'd taken everything she could from the corpse, she fell back and sighed when LaCroix's hand stroked her hair. Her back was pressed against his legs and she turned, her head rested on his thigh as she stared up at him.

LaCroix read the adoration in her gaze and he reached out to run a finger through the scarlet stain of blood at the corner of her mouth. He brought the fingertip to his lips, tasted the warm stickiness, and smiled when she began to rise. She moved to her knees and her hands slid over his thighs in a provocative caress.

"What was his name?"

"Does it matter?"

"No," she murmured, then leaned closer to him. Her senses were vibrant with new awareness, every tiny nuance of sight and sound alive in a way she'd never known before. LaCroix filled her vision, his face pale and extraordinarily beautiful in the muted light and her heightened consciousness. She caught sight of the room she'd awakened in, seeing it for the first time. Slowly, she shook her head in an effort to rid herself of the confusion which clouded the euphoria of seconds ago. Eventually, she found her voice again. "This is my house."

"Yes, it is," LaCroix confirmed, his eyes carefully watched her reactions. "I thought you might wish to wake here."

"How?" For a moment, she didn't really know what it was she wanted to know. The images blurred, little more than incoherent, incomprehensible memories. She started to bring her hand up to her hair and noticed the blood that was smeared in her palm. Her look darted to the body less than two feet away from her and she choked back a scream as understanding flooded into her objecting mind. She'd just killed someone.

LaCroix allowed her to climb to her feet and waited for her next reaction as she ran to the window and threw it open. Gabrielle clutched at the window-frame, and he could see the tremors that shook her body as she stared down into the gardens.

"How long has it been?"

LaCroix rose, walked to her, and slipped his arms around her waist. When she tried to escape his embrace, he held her tighter, and forced her to accept his presence.

"Several days," he murmured into her ear, his tongue tracing the curving lobe. "I was beginning to fear you would not wake."

"I wish I hadn't!" She tried again to wrench free of him, and cried out when he whirled her around and slammed her back against the wall. "I hate you!" she hissed, fury transformed her features. Her eyes glowed golden, and her fangs gleamed in the soft radiance of the waning moon. When she struck out this time, her hand connected with his cheek, the blow jarring enough to make him wince. She regretted the action instantly when he returned the gesture in kind, and Gabrielle felt the chill of true death run her spine when LaCroix's face bent to hers.

"Have a care for your existence, my pet," he warned in a soft

whisper. He saw the words penetrate the haze of pain and replace it with very genuine fright.

"Destroy me then," she countered, her voice shaking with the intensity of her fear. "I would rather that than what you've turned me into."

"I've freed you, Gabrielle," he mocked. "You have an eternity to do whatever you wish."

"An eternity to serve you," she replied. This time her voice broke and tears filled her vision with a red haze.

"You wanted me, Gabrielle," he reminded her. Before she could answer he tilted her head back and smiled, his expression softened with the assurance that he was right. Her eyes captured his, drew him inward as he read both love and hate in their smoky colour. "As you do now."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"This is your home. It is my first gift to you in your new life," he answered. He left her no opportunity to reply as he covered her mouth with his and loosened his hold on her. He wasn't surprised when her body moved willingly into his arms, pressing tightly to him.

Hunger rose anew with the surge of passion that rippled through her, and Gabrielle moaned low in her throat. LaCroix's laughter was like music in her ears and she was caught again in the spell of his presence. She ran her hands over his chest, and fumbled with the buttons of his silk shirt. She was startled when his fingers closed over hers and drew them away from their task.

"Later," he promised. "We're going out."

"Where?" It was difficult to say which disturbed her more, the frustration she felt at his withdrawal, or, the prospect of leaving the safety offered by this ancient house. The streets of Victoria had never frightened her -- yet, now, they contained all the horrors her imagination could conjure.

"Get dressed, Gabrielle," he directed with a smile.

"How is it that all of my things remain as they were?"

LaCroix was stretched out on the huge four-poster bed, long legs crossed casually as he watched every movement she made. She made an inviting picture, he reflected with pleasure. He'd disposed of the boy, and returned to find her standing before the open closet. The sight of her naked body, gleaming like ivory in the moonlight, had almost changed his mind about leaving.

Gabrielle was equally intrigued by the sight that greeted her eyes when she looked at him. The tall, stunningly attractive man sprawled on her bed took her breath away. He was dressed entirely in black, long legs encased in form-fitting leather, his upper body clothed in a shirt made of rich, heavy silk. A leather jacket, again in the midnight black that matched the rest of his attire, was tossed at the foot of the bed. The only jewellery he wore was a heavy silver ring which adorned the little finger of his right hand. Blue eyes snared hers and she smiled when she saw the enjoyment in his expression.

"Should I dress to complement you, Master?" She used the title with a sarcasm that did little to masque her bitterness.

"You complement me nicely as you are, Gabrielle," he purred. He laughed when she turned her back to him, her spine rigid with repressed annoyance. She was silent as she dressed and his eyes never left her as

she moved through the room like an enticing shadow. Long minutes later he rose, desire drawing him to her.

"It would seem that you approve of my choice, LaCroix," she whispered, as she moulded her hips to his. She shivered against him when his hands ran the length of her back, gliding over the matching coolness of satin and smooth skin.

LaCroix caught her lips in a kiss that threatened to have them tumbling into bed before they ever made it past the door. His fingers caressed the silver-grey satin of her dress, tingling when his touch created tremors of reaction in her. His tongue played at her throat, passion teasing his senses, arousing his own hunger. He pulled back, and released her with obvious reluctance. His eyes swept over her in undisguised appreciation.

The dress was strapless, and fit like a second skin from the waist up. The skirt was flowing, the hemline cut into jagged lines that exposed an enticing length of curving legs. She'd chosen stiletto heels to add to the illusion of height and she now stood only half a head shorter than him. Auburn waves tumbled around her shoulders, and a solitary diamond dangled from a fine gold chain at her neck.

"Where are we going?"

"To complete some business," LaCroix replied, anticipation evident in his voice. It would be interesting to see how the night's 'business' ended.

Gabrielle felt the faint stir of warning deep within her and she tried to reach for the whisper. It eluded her probe, and she shook her head, mildly disconcerted with the dizziness that suddenly threatened her.

LaCroix watched her, his eyes sharp, and he felt a similar twinge of reaction. He could sense the vision trying to surface, and the realisation made him smile -- her talent had survived the transformation. Before it could solidify in her mind and become a danger to his present course of action, he grabbed his jacket and propelled her toward the door.

The shock of the night made Gabrielle stumble when they stepped from the door of her house and stood in the garden. She groped for LaCroix's hand and clutched it like a lifeline as she closed her eyes and drew in ragged, unnecessary, breaths. The sounds intensified and she heard the throb of heartbeats, screams, animals, the pulses of life surrounding her. Before the volume reached a deafening level, LaCroix's voice penetrated the madness.

"Reach past the sounds, Gabrielle. Hear only what you wish to hear. Concentrate, my pet," he murmured, his free hand smoothed over her hair as he tilted her head up to meet his look. "Open your eyes," he ordered.

Gabrielle swayed and leaned into his body, clinging to the solid reality of his presence. "I don't want to go out, LaCroix."

"You must learn," LaCroix told her, keeping the impatience from his tone with real effort. "I will not let anyone hurt you, Gabrielle."

Reassured, she nodded and dared to step away from him. This time the shock of sensory perceptions was muted, and she glanced up at him, gratitude shining in her eyes.

"It will get much easier," he smiled. Before she could lose her

nerve a second time, he led her to a waiting car. They'd get to flying soon enough, he thought with an ironic twist of his lips.

The nightclub, a dark, atmospheric place appropriately called *The Vampyr's Crypt*, was not officially open when they arrived. All that was required to grant them admission was a single glance at LaCroix. Gabrielle's eyebrows rose when the handsome young man who ran the club greeted the pale vampire with a warmth that was vaguely disturbing.

"Who is he?" she wondered when the blond had left them at a corner table.

"His name is Eric," LaCroix said without interest.

"And you have business with this boy?" she asked, her doubt very evident in her tone.

LaCroix laughed and shook his head. Eric returned with two glasses, placed them on the table and waited for LaCroix's attention. When the vampire continued to ignore the blond, he turned the power of his stare to Gabrielle and she felt the sharp stab of pain within her head. She gasped silently at the awareness and was jolted further when she heard Eric's sudden cry of anguish.

"LaCroix!" She recognised immediately what had caused the boy's pain and she reached across the table to place her hand on LaCroix's arm. She withdrew instantly when he glared at her.

"If I require anything further of you, Eric, I will let you know," LaCroix whispered. He dismissed the young man with a casual flick of his wrist and the boy staggered back. He hesitated for a moment longer, stared at LaCroix in confusion, then he fled.

"Is he also one of your . . . 'children'?" Gabrielle questioned in a shaken whisper.

"You tell me," LaCroix suggested as he picked up the wine glass and eyed the scarlet mixture swirling in the crystal globe. "Concentrate on his presence, and tell me why he is so angered that he dared to confront you."

Controlling the tremor of fear that rippled along her spine, Gabrielle did as he directed. She focused her thoughts on the blond man who watched them from behind the bar, and within seconds she tapped into his thoughts. It took only a glimpse to understand why Eric had allowed her to so easily read him, and she glared at LaCroix.

"Jealousy, LaCroix," she breathed. "A powerful emotion. Will you discard me so freely, my love?"

LaCroix didn't bother with a reply, his attention was diverted by the arrival of his guest. He leaned back in his chair and watched Gabrielle's expression as Jared Langdon was led to their table. When he sensed she would have risen and fled, LaCroix's hand clamped her wrist and held her where she was.

"Why?" she hissed in fury, and fear.

"We have business to discuss," LaCroix repeated softly, his fingers like steel around her fragile limb.

"Jared is . . . was my . . ." Gabrielle stuttered to a halt and turned wide, imploring eyes to the vampire. The expression she glimpsed in the endless depths of his eyes was unsettling, and she flinched when he leaned forward and his free hand touched her chin.

"What was this one to you, my pet?" he murmured, his voice like the velvet stroke of mink over naked skin.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to answer, uncertain of what response would chase the shimmer of danger from his gaze. "He was my friend, LaCroix," she finally whispered shakily. "Nothing more."

LaCroix accepted her answer without visible reaction, then rose to greet Langdon. His smile grew when the other man stared at Gabrielle in undisguised bewilderment. The confusion vanished seconds later, transforming his features into happiness.

"Gabby!" Jared swept past LaCroix and all but lifted Gabrielle from her chair. He tightened his hold on her and buried his face into the soft fall of her hair. "I don't believe this," he said quietly, voice rough with emotion. "How?"

"Jared, please don't ask me questions I can't answer," she replied, as she eased free of his embrace. LaCroix's hand glided over her back and came to rest at the back of her neck, long fingers caressing beneath the heavy auburn waves of her hair. She shivered noticeably, her head unconsciously pressed into the contact. Her eyes closed and she didn't see the anger that lit Jared's dark gaze as he watched her respond to the vampire's seductive touch.

"You didn't have to arrange your death to run off with this guy," he snapped. He was perversely pleased when her attention abruptly refocused on him.

"That's not what happened," she told him. She wanted to reach out to him, to reassure him, but her body refused to act on the desire. She felt the overwhelming hold of LaCroix's presence, draining her of her will, replacing that energy with a longing that was equally, if not more, powerful.

"I wondered why you were so adamant about buying the old Sheraton house," Jared remarked, his angry stare turned to the pale figure behind Gabrielle. "I didn't realise it was for the woman who already owned it."

LaCroix's laughter was chilling. He stepped back and offered Jared a seat at the table with them.

"What is it you want now?" Jared demanded, his entire manner voiced his suspicion as clearly as spoken words. "I assume you'll be returning to the office, Gabby," he added, with a glance at her.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Langdon," LaCroix interjected quietly. "Gabrielle will be leaving the city in a few days."

"And?" Jared prompted impatiently.

"I thought you might wish to see each other before we . . ."

"Just who the hell are you?!" Jared snapped, all but rising from his chair as he whirled to square off against the vampire.

"Jared!"

Gabrielle touched his arm and yanked hard when he tried to ignore her. "Look at me, damn you!"

LaCroix's eyebrows rose and he leaned back in his chair to observe how she would behave. He hadn't expected anger from her, yet she was unmistakably furious.

"You have no right to question me," she hissed at him. "If I'd known you were the business associate we were to meet, I would not have come here," she spared a glance at LaCroix as she made that assertion, then redirected her gaze with a shift of her eyes.

"What's happened to you, Gabby?" Jared questioned, his confusion resurfacing and filling his expression.

"I've died," she stated bluntly. "Gabrielle Sinclaire is gone, Jared. I am not the woman you . . ."

"Love, Gabby," he whispered, now oblivious to LaCroix as he pleaded silently for her understanding of his pain. "Do you have any idea what it's been like for me?"

"I gave you everything, Jared," she replied, and swallowed hard against the swell of regret and pain that lodged in her throat.

"I didn't want your bloody company, Gabrielle!" he shouted.

"Don't you think I know that, Jared," she returned, her eyes downcast now that the spurt of anger had spent itself. She looked up as movement near the door announced that *The Vampyr's Crypt* was now open to the general public.

LaCroix did not miss the distraction and his expression darkened when he aimed a glance at Eric. The young blond cast him a look that radiated defiance, and continued toward the entrance to greet the first of the people who would inhabit the club throughout the night. LaCroix ignored the boy and rose, and held his hand out to Gabrielle as he did.

"There is a private room behind the bar," he said quietly. "Perhaps we should continue our meeting there?" Despite the wording, it was not a suggestion.

"Jared?" Gabrielle tried to keep the tone polite, but there was a noticeable note of demand in the single word. It was difficult to say which of the two men was annoying her more at the moment.

"I want an explanation, Gabby," Jared muttered.

"Which you may get," she answered softly, the ice returned to her voice, "if you want to talk to me without a nightclub of people around to hear our conversation."

Jared nodded curtly, and followed as LaCroix led them to the bar. His rage blossomed again when Gabrielle's arms encircled the vampire's waist and her head rested against his shoulder. Her expression was one of such happiness he detested LaCroix for being the source of her joy. How many times throughout the past few years had he longed to be in this man's position? His thoughts must have been written on his face, he realised a second later. LaCroix smiled over Gabby's head and bent to murmur something in her ear. Jared watched as she lifted her head and stepped directly in front of LaCroix. The other man smiled again and leaned down to catch her mouth in a kiss that made Jared tremble with the force of his fury. Half expecting Gabby to reject the caress, his jealousy twisted into tighter coils within him as he watched the fair head begin to withdraw, only to be pulled back to hers another time.

Jared would have spun on his heel and left the club, but LaCroix was quicker. He opened the door to the back room, and gently eased Gabrielle away from him. "I'll join you in a few minutes," he directed the statement to both Jared and Gabrielle. "I have to see Eric on a personal matter," he concluded.

The private room turned out to be a suite of three rooms. The sitting room they entered was elegant and rich, a direct contrast to the main area of the nightclub, which was stark and ultra-modern. The windows were hidden beneath heavy velvet draperies, the furniture was a combination of antique, gleaming wood and leather covered chairs and couch. Gabrielle peered through the curtained doorway at the rear of the room and a whisper of smile touched her lips when she saw the same richness of decor marked the bedroom. A huge, round bed dominated the room, leaving her to wonder exactly why the suite was open to her -- it

felt very much like an apartment that was lived in.

"Who is he, Gabby?" Jared demanded, jarring her into refocusing her wandering attention. Wide grey eyes stared at him, their expression mildly confused. "And what the hell has he done to you?"

Gabrielle laughed, the reaction completely involuntary. She went to sit on the couch, the leather creaking as she settled into the stuffed, comfortable cushions.

"Obviously you know him, Jared," she answered, gesturing for him to join her. "You sold my house to him."

"What was I supposed to do, Gabby -- live there myself?" he retorted. "That would have made things a little tricky for you, under the circumstances, wouldn't you say?" He tried, but the venom slipped into his voice. She appeared not to notice. Or was it just that it no longer mattered a damn what he felt? a tiny voice inside his head wondered.

"I never wanted you to be hurt like this, Jared," Gabrielle began after a lengthy pause. "The last thing I ever expected was to meet LaCroix again."

"Again?" Jared repeated sharply. "Are you telling me you knew this asshole before? Is that why you'd never let me near you? Because of him."

"Not exactly," she replied, her voice soft and compelling, and a direct foil to his angry mood. She could feel the pleasant fuzziness of languor creeping into her limbs, the aura sensual and arousing. "And, you are near me now," she whispered, as she slid closer to him. She could hear his heartbeat, the strong, steady rhythm like a drum drawing her into his orbit. Every part of her woke with new awareness of his nearness. The subtle scent of his aftershave, the smooth texture of his dark hair, even the ebony depths of his eyes drew her inward. Guided by instinct, she leaned into him. Her lips barely touched the corner of his jaw before his hand tangled in her hair and drew her mouth to his with a fierceness that startled her.

Gabrielle relaxed in the embrace as Jared's kiss became a demand and her hand came to rest in the centre of his chest. Her fingertips tingled at the perception of life throbbing beneath her light touch. The beat was erratic now, excited, and she shivered as the hunger began to sweep through her. His blood was hot and enticing, and she drew back from the kiss, her smile filled with enjoyment. Jared took no notice of the glow in her eyes as grey became golden. His lips were trailing kisses along her neck as his hands began to glide upward from her waist, finally exploring the gentle curves of her body for the first time.

Gabrielle's fingers slipped through his hair and she bent her head to the side of his neck, her tongue caressing the pulse when he pulled back to allow her access to the base of his throat. He shuddered when she began nuzzling the soft skin and Gabrielle felt her fangs emerge as desire burned through her.

"Gabby," Jared murmured. "God! I love you so much!"

Gabrielle heard the breathless declaration through the haze of blood lust and in that instant she understood why LaCroix had arranged this meeting. Ice filled her veins and she jerked back with a suddenness that left Jared gaping at her. She hid her face and forced the hunger down, the effort required all her concentration. She clutched the edge of the couch as she heard the deep, resonant laughter of her lover.

"Take him, my pet, he has waited long enough."

"No!"

"What the fuck is going on -- " Jared whirled toward the sound of LaCroix's voice. His features distorted with hatred again when the tall, forbidding presence came fully into the room.

"Don't, Jared," Gabrielle began, her fingers closed on his arm when he would have risen to face the vampire. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Of course it does," LaCroix countered. "He has wanted this for years, but he never dared take what it was he desired." He came to a halt in front of Gabrielle and she released her hold on Jared's arm, then rose in a graceful flow of liquid motion. Her features were drawn into a scowl of anger.

"I will not do this, LaCroix," she stated vehemently.

"You will do whatever I wish of you," he replied, his eyes glittered with power and irritation.

"Not this," she repeated, shaken in spite of her anger.

"We're leaving, Gabby," Jared informed her. He stood and reached for her, only to be intercepted by LaCroix. His eyes widened with shock and pain when the vampire's fingers threatened to crush the bones of his wrist.

"Gabrielle is mine, Langdon," LaCroix said quietly. "You would do well to remember that for the short time you have left."

"Please, LaCroix," Gabrielle knew the threat was not idle. She touched his hand where it still held Jared's wrist, and her fingers stroked the vampire's pale skin. Gradually she felt his grip loosen and she drew his hand into both of hers. "Let him go, please?" she requested, her eyes punctuated the plea.

"Why?" he whispered. He brushed a light kiss over her trembling lips. "Tell me why it is important to you, my pet."

"He was my friend," she answered. She didn't dare to look at Jared despite the enticement to warn him against saying a word. "There is no need for him to . . ."

"Die, Gabrielle," LaCroix supplied with an ironic twitch of smile. "He would happily die for you though," he continued, his mocking tone grew more sardonic as he spoke. "He would give you anything, including his life's blood."

"Which is why I would ask for nothing," she demurred. She allowed her gaze to shift this time, and she saw the disorientation in Jared's eyes. He was already under LaCroix's control, she realised. The vampire was simply deciding what to do with the mortal. Her eyes rose to meet LaCroix's mild curiosity, and she hesitated.

"Yet, you would ask something of me," he completed her unspoken thought.

"I am yours," she pushed down the flare of true anger the admission created within her. "I would do whatever you wanted of me. Is that not reason enough to grant me a single request?"

"Only one, Gabrielle," he acquiesced with a nod, recognising her blood right without her knowing it. "You have been less than a night in your new life. Would you be so quick to claim your favour, when we have an eternity of lives ahead of us?"

"Yes," she responded without hesitation. "Please. I will not kill him, LaCroix. I would rather die myself than use him to feed what you've made me!" She wanted to be calm, but anger and revulsion made the words sharp and low, filled with emotions she would have preferred not to reveal to her master.

"Perhaps I should show him your true nature," LaCroix suggested coldly.

Gabrielle winced and shrank back, her eyes once again filled with fright. It wouldn't take much, she knew; even with her anger between them, she was completely aware of his sexuality. She could feel the hunger rise within her and desire of another kind teased at her mind, making the need greater still. She resisted the temptation to touch LaCroix, forced her body to impose distance that might give her back some small amount of control.

She also knew he could read every shift of her mind as clearly as if she'd spoken to him. That thought made her angrier than ever and she glared at him, and deliberately closed her thoughts. The shielding was intuitive and the action was taken before she could consciously stop it. She blinked in surprise when she read the rise of fury within LaCroix's brilliant blue eyes. He could no longer *hear* her.

"He's not worth your fear," the vampire told her, his eyes measured the man they discussed.

"If that's true, then he's not worth your notice," she stated softly.

LaCroix laughed at the approach and nodded his approval. He considered her for several moments more before he accepted her choice. He led Jared to the door and Gabrielle watched as the vampire spoke quietly to the other man. She saw Jared nod, his eyes dazed and dull, then LaCroix opened the door and watched him leave.

Gabrielle walked to one of the windows and pulled aside the drapery. Through a haze of red moisture, she saw Jared climb into his car. Seconds later, he was gone. She leaned forward, her forehead touched the cool pane of glass. The emptiness of loss threatened to engulf her completely and she closed her eyes against the misery she felt.

LaCroix waited for a few moments, and allowed his mind to absorb the results of the night's 'business'. He had achieved his initial goal. Plus, he had discovered the first authentic evidence of Gabrielle's psychic talent remaining intact. He was distinctly pleased.

He crossed to the window and stood behind her. She would not be able to ignore him for long. He smiled when she stepped back, her body leaning against him for support that was more a mental need than an actual physical requirement. His hands rested at her waist for several moments and he felt a tremor ripple through her as she awaited him.

"What do you want, Gabrielle?" he murmured close to her ear.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, unable to voice the words that would answer him. Deep inside her, she shut the door on the last part of her life and accepted the reality of what she had become. She belonged to LaCroix, a possession paid for in blood, bound beyond life or death. The truly amazing realisation was the lack of despair that knowledge created within her. The only emotion she could hold onto was the madness his nearness incited, and the passion fed by every movement he made.

"I'm tired, LaCroix," she breathed softly, suddenly weary beyond argument.

LaCroix gently lifted her hair and touched his lips to the softness of her shoulder. Her hand rose and slender fingers caressed his head as

his mouth explored the smooth column of her neck. He could feel her shake against him and he pulled her closer, to mould her body to his without allowing her to turn to face him.

"What do you want, Gabrielle?" he asked again. His hands glided over the cool satin of her dress until the tips of his fingers traced the straining outline of her nipples against the delicate material.

Gabrielle's hands clutched at his forearms and she turned her head into his neck, seeking some point of contact with his skin. With a suddenness that left her trembling, LaCroix released her and walked away. She stumbled back, groped for the wall to prevent herself from falling.

He sat on the couch and watched her, blue eyes distant and detached as he waited for her response to his withdrawal. Grey eyes were glowing and hungry when she regained her composure seconds later and came toward him. One eyebrow rose in speculative interest as she dropped to her knees in front of him and took his hands in hers. LaCroix allowed himself to be tugged forward and their eyes locked as she eased the jacket off his shoulders and tossed it into a corner of the leather couch. She had his shirt open and pushed aside moments later and he held her face between his hands as she began to explore the contours of his chest.

"You haven't answered me, pet," he told her, his voice rough.

"Yes," she smiled. "I have." Without hesitation she pulled his head to hers and covered his lips in a kiss that was filled with the depth of her passion for him. His tongue probed into her mouth and she arched forward, silently begging for his touch. She sighed softly when he pulled her up into his arms and she settled across his thighs. She felt her dress falling away and a choked moan escaped her as his fingers whispered over her skin at last. The ache in her body became nearly unbearable as he teased her but refused to let her touch him. He held her hands and her fingers entwined with his, the grip strong enough to have broken mortal bones as her spine curved into a sensual arch.

Endless minutes later, LaCroix released her and she slid off him long enough to strip away the last of her clothing. She watched with eager anticipation when he did the same, then sat back into the cushioned softness of the couch. He laughed, the sound a growl of satisfaction when she straddled his thighs again. He grasped her hips and enjoyed the shudder of rapt elation that softened her features as their bodies joined. She wrapped her arms around his neck and guided his mouth to her throat, the invitation a silent admission of love. LaCroix's fangs sank deep into soft, yielding flesh. He drank deeply as their passion reached dizzying heights.

Gabrielle felt the sweet agony of exquisite desire building to fevered hunger and she pressed tighter to him, her hands caressed the soft silkiness of his hair as he took her soul from her body. She cried out when he pulled back seconds later and stared into her eyes, blue now burning golden fire into hers. He smiled and nodded as his head fell back. She opened her mouth and bit into his neck as her entire body shuddered in greater ecstasy.

It felt like an eternity before awareness of her surroundings returned. Gabrielle stirred against him, the faint taste of LaCroix's blood still on her lips. His arms cradled her to his chest and she

murmured softly into his neck before licking at the healing wound she'd left there. He eased her head back and stared down at her.

"I love you," she whispered.

LaCroix smiled, and kissed her.

"We should go," he told her a short while later, fully aware of the lateness of the hour. She'd literally passed out after their lovemaking, and he knew her strength was fragile. There was a great deal to teach her before they faced Nicholas; LaCroix did not want to risk losing her.

"Why am I so tired?" she questioned. She was genuinely amazed by the effort required to rise and gather her clothes. It took even more of her stamina to actually get dressed again.

"It will pass," LaCroix told her. "We have all the time in the world, Gabrielle," he assured her with a chilling smile.

Had she been less enchanted by him at that moment, Gabrielle would have felt a warning in the quiet words. Instead, she slid her arms around him and basked in the security his presence offered her. The silk shirt was still open and she placed a kiss over his heart before she stepped back to allow him to finish dressing.

They left the nightclub minutes later.

Eric was no where to be seen.

LaCroix stretched his legs out toward the crackling flames that burned in the huge stone fireplace that dominated the library of the Sheraton mansion. Above him, on the second floor, Gabrielle was asleep. Dawn was less than an hour away.

He twirled the delicate stem of the crystal wine glass between his fingers, and enjoyed the dancing play of muted light glinting off the red liquid in the glittering globe. He drank deeply from the glass, draining it before he set it aside. The leaping tongues of fire drew him back in time and his smile was indolent.

"Soon, Nicholas," he purred to the silent room.

Gabrielle didn't remember Knight, but that too was likely to change as the distant past merged with the present within her memory. When she recalled Nicholas, she would try to refuse LaCroix his revenge. But he'd granted her the gift of Jared Langdon's life -- a request he'd known she would make. She could no longer claim a blood right he could not deny.

Nicholas had always held a special place in Gabrielle's heart; the two had had an understanding that had caused LaCroix's wrath to emerge on many occasions. That she treated Nicholas with near reverent respect had infuriated LaCroix. She had loved Knight in a way LaCroix would not tolerate. It had been the cause of his retreat several days before she had been executed. Nicholas had been devastated by her loss. And, he had turned that rage on LaCroix and had left the master vampire. It had taken many years of searching before he and Janette had located Nicholas once again.

Now, Gabrielle would help him destroy the shining Knight they had both loved.

CASE FILE #13
by *Pam Jensen*

Every day it's the same awful vision that haunts my rest... I'm walking through a barren city landscape. All around me the only sound I hear are the empty echoes of my own boot heels bouncing off the canyon walls of the high-rises.

It is a shadowy autumnal landscape with crumpled bits of newspaper blowing along the ground like tumbleweeds. I smell an ozone tang in the air. It has either just stopped raining, or it is just about to start. I can't tell which.

Before me an urban forest of trees line up in soldier straight rows awaiting a pedestrian to inspect them. As if losing buttons from their well worn uniforms they drop red-tinted leaves on to the unyielding concrete ground-cover. A small burst of wind causes the newly liberated leaves to twirl like street dancers. They hope futilely to capture the interest of a random passerby. Failing that the entertainers collapse despondently into small, ragged heaps on the coal-black road. Some of the strays are helplessly caught in a stream of gutter water. It carries the leaves into a drain where they slip through the yawning mouth and past grate teeth, like so many clots of blood being hungrily sucked down a gullet.

I wander aimlessly across this barren landscape with a nervous sensation of something being about to happen. Something is definitely pending. I can sense being watched. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing up.

It's always the same dream, Doctor. The streets are vaguely familiar, yet it is a hauntingly strange, almost alien landscape. I turn a corner and walk with determination, yet no sense of purpose, down yet another vacant street. The weather turns chill, but it isn't really the weather at all. Have you ever noticed how different parts of the same city seem to vary greatly in climate. Why is it the poorer sections of the urban sprawl always seem colder?

For the first time I encounter others. In a vacant lot several figures surround a metal trash drum in which a fire is blazing. The people sense my approach and scatter, blending their shadows into the night. Then I realize the burning light isn't a fire, but a person standing on a short pedestal. It's as if the being is suspended between the heavens and the earth, a part of both, and yet neither.

The being is very beautiful, androgynous, surrounded by an ethereal glowing light. No -- not surrounded -- the illumination seems to be generated from within, from the very heart of the being. I hunger to be warmed by this light. Only... like the sun it burns my eyes, and causes my skin to itch with the radiant flow of heat.

Like a moth I am drawn irresistibly toward the tempting, taunting beauty of this flame. I yearn to embrace the light. I reach out my arms and step forward...

Only the light, the lover I court, takes a step backward from me. Every step forward I take is matched by a move away by the light. Then my paramour turns eyes on me that reflect the saddest expression I've ever seen in all my Life. We communicate with our souls for the briefest of moments... almost an eternity, really. Then the contact is broken and the being turns and runs away.

I am left alone... in the darkness... cold and lonely... again...

JANETTE EXPLAINS

We have an odd relationship.
It's based on timeworn trust.
But I admit there have been times
He held for me, disgust.

It's true I did seduce him
When he was a knight, so fine;
But as he came to understand,
The idea wasn't mine.

For I was then, as he became,
A child who was controlled
By one much more than mentor, who
My very will, did hold.

And with LaCroix's insistence, I
Helped bring this noble knight
Across into the darkness which
Forever smothers light

Eventually my Nicola
Would these bonds bend and break
No mortal would his victim, be;
No human life he'd take.

I still do not completely know
Why human he'd become;
To me the whole idea is just
A wee bit troublesome.

But even though our paths diverged
In purposes, and such;
No matter how I disapprove,
I care for him so much.

If mortal he will one day be,
To this he condescends;
We'll still be less than lovers, but
A great deal more than friends.

by *Kathleen Y. Bergeron*

BY VIRTUE OF NECESSITY

by

Winifred McBeth

"Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?" The teasing whisper came close enough to Janette's ear to be heard over the blaring sound system of the Raven. "And burnt the topless towers of Illium?"

Janette smiled slyly and twisted sinuously around to face Nicholas. She ran a finger lightly under his chin. "Shall I make you immortal with a kiss?"

A shadow flickered over the teasing look in her beloved's eyes as he answered quietly, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Janette snatched her hand away and stifled a frown. "What brings you to the dark side, Nickola? Slumming?"

He shrugged with the eloquence of boredom that only came with the weight of centuries. "I'm off duty. It's not baseball season." The teasing look returned. "I thought I'd mingle," he eyed her appreciatively, "with the beautiful people."

"I see," Janette purred, satisfied with his flattery. "And what about your little friend?"

The policeman put on his best straight face and said, "Schanke's been on day shift all week."

The Raven's mistress wrinkled her nose. "And there he should stay. How you put up with him, with any of them..." With a delicate shudder, she cast off all thoughts of Nick's police partner. She touched Nicholas' hand with a light, teasing tracing of her finger. "Why haven't you brought your Natalie dancing?"

"We're just friends," he was quick to assert.

Janette sighed and patted his hand in an indulgent manner. "Nickola, even the very best of friends," she traced a vein on the inside of his wrist, "should go dancing occasionally."

Nick grinned. "Schanke's a married man but I'll tell him you asked about him."

Janette directed a look at Nick as scorching as full sunlight and pushed his hand away. She was distracted from a cutting reply when a club patron approached her nervously.

Nick tried to appear politely disinterested, but gleaned what he could from his peripheral vision. The young man who had approached Janette was well dressed, but not with the on-the-make fashion of most patrons of the Raven. He seemed very pale and thin but did not have the distinctive scent of cold blood that the undead did.

He held out his hand, wrist up, to Janette. She accepted it and raised his wrist to her mouth to take a delicate taste of the neat cut

that had been made on it. She closed her eyes a moment, savoring the flavor, before looking up at the mortal. Nick tensed but continued watching.

Janette locked eyes with the human, in the look that compelled. She asked him one question, another, then, satisfied, released him. The club owner turned to catch the eye of another patron, one Nick knew from long ago. Janette nodded and the woman approached eagerly. She also bowed to taste the mortal's wound. Janette nodded again as the woman pulled the mortal into the dance.

"Smelling the cork?" Nick regretted the words as soon as they were said. He had never pressed Janette about she filled her cellar.

Janette was not angry. She seemed, instead, to be restive. "There is a plague, Nickola, killing the mortals." She faced him directly. "The one in the blood, do you know it?"

"Yes." In his long existence, he had seen many of humanity's plagues.

"It offers a painful death, without dignity." If Janette shared little else with humanity, she could understand pride. "There are some, when they find they have the plague, who come here to find a cleaner end."

"Janette," Nick interrupted her uneasily. This was something that he had long been trying to leave behind.

"I send them away, Nickola. I make them forget." She patted his hand in a comforting gesture. "I don't need grieving families on my doorstep, asking questions." Nick relaxed a tension he hadn't realized that he'd held. "Then there are some, who have no one. When the pain begins, they return," Janette studied him, daring his disapproval. "To trade the last night of their lives for a kiss."

"I suppose that makes you an angel of mercy," Nick teased her lightly.

"Mercy?" Janette repeated after him, amusement forming a gentle twist in the side of her mouth. She shrugged on shoulder as though in blithe denial of an accusation. "I suppose."

The Raven's mistress slid down from her perch at the table, swinging her hips around in a bold stance before Nick. "I wish to dance tonight, Nickola."

He stood and bowed to her in the old, courtly manner. "What are friends for?"

They danced all night, crowding the sunrise until the sun called their bluff and placidly started the day. Nicholas raced the light all the way home, winning in a breathless finish as the elevator doors closed behind him.

He took his good mood to work with him next shift. It stayed even when he saw Schanke at his desk, ready to ride with him all evening. The caseload was comparatively light, "off season", as Schanke put it, offering Nick an excuse to go off the clock early and drop by Natalie's lab. The price of admission was three genuine swallows of the doctor's latest batch of lab tea.

"Are you ever going to tell me what's in this?" Nick was searching the cup for suspicious floaters.

"Are you ever going to drink it without complaining?" Natalie retorted. "Tea. Earl Grey. Hot. Drink it!"

"How did your day go?" While he was talking, Nick didn't have to swallow.

"Great! Kit's been clean for two months now." Natalie was easily

distracted when the topic was her volunteer work at the Lighthouse, a shelter-cum-refuge for kids on the street. "He's starting to learn how to read."

"And you're tutoring him?" Nick prompted. He could not be available to the shelter around the clock and had to vicariously enjoy Natalie's stories of rescue.

"Sure," Natalie grinned. "We do a version of Cat In The Hat that puts 'em in the aisles."

"What about Jess?" Nick asked.

The coroner sobered quickly. "She's gone. She left her baby at the Lighthouse. Child Services has him."

Nick put a comforting hand on Natalie's shoulder. "What did you tell me? 'You can't bring in everyone who's out on the street'?"

Natalie put her hand over his and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Yes. But it still hurts. I want them all to win, to have a chance to beat the streets. Too many of them end up here." Her broad gesture took in the forensics lab and the morgue.

"What about Teri?" Nick tried another name from the many that Natalie had told him about.

"She is staying, so far." Natalie took cheer at that much success. "She's learning how to take care of a baby, to be ready when she-or-he comes."

"And Kit can read him-or-her his Dr. Suess," Nick suggested laughingly.

"Hey, we may be up to 'Horton Hears A Who' by then!" Natalie laughed with him.

"My favorite is 'Green Eggs And Ham'." Nick set down his cup and gestured dramatically as he recited, "'I do not like green eggs and ham/I do not like them, Sam I Am/I will not eat them here nor there/I will not eat them anywhere!'" He began to edge back toward the door. "Not on land and not on sea/And I will not drink your tea!"

He had made his retreat all the way through the lab door before Natalie shouted after him, "Hey! You come back here and drink this! Nick?"

The vampire arrived at his loft, feeling cocky at the trick he had pulled on Natalie. Once he had settled in and found himself standing at an open refrigerator staring at nothing but wine bottles, a twinge of guilt set in.

Instead of pouring himself a drink of the red stuff, Nick went to the sink and filled his goblet from the tap. He held it up in mock toast. "To my health." After the barest of hesitations, he drank it. The first swallow went down uneasily. The next swallow went unwillingly. At the threat of a third swallow, his stomach rebelled and pitched all of it back into the sink.

"She can't say I didn't try," Nick told himself as he cleaned up the mess. He picked up the goblet, faced the refrigerator and the set the goblet down again. He hadn't checked his messages yet.

"Nicholas," Janette's voice, sharp and impatient, spoke from the tape. "I must see you, at the Raven. I have something important to ask you. Come as soon as you can."

The sun had already risen. It would be impossible to go now. "Soon," she had said, not, "Now." Obviously, she was not in immediate danger. Nick played the message again, listening closely for some clue to the nature of her request. She contacted him only rarely, with the excuse that he had taken up "bad habits". It was rare still for her to

ask favors.

The puzzle so intrigued him that he had gone upstairs to bed before he remembered the empty goblet on the table. He slid into sleep with a drowsy smile of victory.

He stopped at the Raven before reporting for duty and old apprehensions resurfaced when Janette did not meet him at the entrance. The music pulsed around him as he opened the door and walked down the steps toward the dance floor.

"Janette sent me to get you." Nick blinked at the changeling who had appeared at his side. Her height was just up to his shoulder, her hair a dandelion fluff of white-blonde. Her entire frame was delicate, as if she were made of something very rare and fragile. He took her for child until he saw the age in her eyes. She was older than she seemed, as they all were in The Raven.

As Nicholas followed her through the club to the private rooms in the back, he was struck with the impression that he followed a willow-the-wisp, a fey creature who played grim mischief with mortals.

His guide brought him to one of the private rooms where Janette was waiting calmly to receive him. He equanimity gave no clue to what urgent business had led her to call him here. The Raven's mistress greeted him softly and invited him with a gesture to a place beside her on the divan.

"Thank you, Gwen." The young woman hesitated, as though waiting for some further sign of approval from Janette.

"Can I get you anything?" The offer seemed almost to be made as an excuse to stay.

Janette declined and then, to Nick's surprise, turned to repeat the offer to him. She knew well and good that he did not drink from her cellar. He looked from Janette to the young woman. "No, Thank you."

"That will be all, Gwen." There was an undertone in the dismissal that Nick did not follow. Janette watched her departure, as though making sure of their privacy. "What do you think of her?"

Nick turned a distracted look in the direction that Gwen had gone. "You're hiring them rather young, aren't you?"

"I found her in the club's dumpster," Janette told him. "She was sleeping off a beating."

Pieces fell neatly into place for Nick. "And you want a policeman to take her off your hands."

"That was over a year ago," Janette contradicted him. "I sent her away. I told her to forget where she had been. I told her go get her injuries tended to." An ironic arch of one eyebrow. "You corrupt me, Nickola."

Nick acknowledged the charge with a tilt of his head. "But she's still here."

"She was beaten again and left for dead," Janette smoothly continued. "I don't take in strays. I made her forget--again--and told her to go to one of those agencies that humanity thinks will cure all ills." Janette settled back against the divan in the manner of nobility discussing the habits of commoners.

"But?" Nicholas prompted.

For a moment's silence, Janette seemed to have found some fascination in the patterns of the carpet. "She has the plague, Nickola. She has come for easy death."

"But she's only a child!" Nick protested.

Janette shook her head. "She is not as young as you think. She is

not a 'minor', by their laws."

"But you can't" His objections stalled at Janette's icy look.

"When she came here to ask for her death, she and I had a talk." Janette's hands twitched, as though she longed for the prop of her cigarettes. "When she was in my dumpster the first time, she had been beaten by her ... employer." Janette had nearly said, "Master." The oldest habits are the hardest to break.

"She sells herself on the street. He was not satisfied with her income." Janette looked at Nicholas and away. "He was very rarely satisfied."

"The agency you sent her to?" Nick leaned forward.

"What is the old excuse?" Janette said with disdain. "Overworked and understaffed?"

"But I could ..." The policeman grasped at the air.

"She is dying." The statement held no reprieve. "No agency can change that. She has no one, except her master, and he knows less of mercy than I do."

"Her family?" He offered one last protest.

"She is alone. She has come here because she does not wish to die alone or in pain."

Nick had gone silent, sitting drawn into himself, as though to touch any piece of the Raven would make him a part of it.

"I shall have to choose carefully, of course." Janette continued to look around the room, always away from Nick. "It must be someone who is ... subtle. Someone who can show," She hesitated, as though searching for a word in a foreign tongue, "compassion." Her restless glance settled squarely on Nicholas.

"No." He began to rise, to get away, but Janette captured his wrists. He pulled and twisted, but she held firm. "No." His tense voice was almost frantic. "You're asking me to kill a child."

"Nicholas," Her calm, admonishing tone held him still. "I could do that." A moment's pause and he was still listening. "What I'm asking of you is that you give her one night. Take her dancing. Listen to music, Buy her ice cream." Janette let go of Nick to open her hands to the possibilities. "And then, at the end of the evening, give her a kiss goodnight."

"It's been over a hundred years," Nick said hoarsely. He looked trapped.

"Surely, you haven't forgotten, Nicholas." Janette looked at him patiently.

"No." He held his hands before himself as though they were still bound by some tie. "Never."

"Nickola," Janette touched him gently, "You cannot die of their plague."

He grasped her hand, clutched at it. "I know. But," He seemed to struggle to breathe before he met her eyes. "I can't."

Janette regarded him silently. "Very well." She withdrew her hand and began to turn away.

He held her back with a touch on her shoulder. "What will you do?"

Janette did not turn around. Her voice was cool, "That is not your concern."

"Wait!" He took a step after Janette and she turned again to face him.

"If you are not certain, Nickola, you will frighten the girl. You will hurt her." Her tone was deliberately blunt. "I could do that."

He held his hands out, unwilling to refuse her, but unwilling to consent. Janette put her hands in his in a placating gesture. "Go home," she told him. "Sleep on it. Tell me tomorrow, if you have decided."

"My next day off is Friday." He seemed surprised that he could remember such mundane details.

"Very well. Friday, then." Janette had been guiding him gently toward the door. She whispered in his ear, "Be certain, Nickola."

His sleep that night was uneasy. He rarely dreamed anymore. Rather, the web of his memories surrounded him as he slept, trapping him in he dark strands.

This memory was one of his oldest. The sun beat down on him, shimmering into the distance with desert heat. There was sand in his mouth, in his hair, under his armor where it drove him nearly mad with the itch. He turned, barely in time to block the downward stroke of a scimitar. His ears roared with the clamor of battle around him, the shriek of a wounded horse, the clatter of armor, the ringing clash of weapons, the shouts of men fighting in confusion.

He dispatched his attacker and then turned at the cry of a young voice. "Nicholas! Help me!"

The crusader wheeled his horse around to see a young man crumpled on the ground, bowed by the weight of the chain mail he sore. He had taken a sword cut in the face and blood was running into his eyes.

"Paul!" Nicholas shouted, urging his horse through the confusion toward the youth. Nicholas had met the swordsman in the encampment of the newest arrivals. Paul was the third son of a minor family and had hoped to better himself in the Crusades. Nicholas had recognized in the young man, the same idealism he himself had had before it was scoured away by sand and head and blood.

A Saracen on horseback was heading toward Paul, intent on running him down. Nicholas spurred his horse forward and blocked the charge, killing the enemy with a single sword stroke to the heart. The infidel was hardly older than Paul.

Paul had struggled to his feet by the grip that he had on Nicholas's stirrup. The knight shouted at him, "Where is your sword, boy?"

"I was unhorsed," The blind, bloody face turned toward his voice. "I lost my grip ... I cannot see, Nicholas."

"Climb on behind me." It was a foolish offer, at best. Nicholas could easily be overbalanced by the weight of his armor and be trapped like a turtle on the sand.

"Withdraw!" Paul was still fumbling with the stirrup when the cry came, echoed by each Crusader in turn. "Withdraw to the city!"

Nicholas's commander rode toward him. The man was ill-tempered and impatient, as much a warhorse as the beast he rode. "Leave him, Nicholas! Withdraw or be overwhelmed!" Even as he bellowed the order out, a foot soldier of the enemy rushed up and tried to cut the commander's saddle-girth. The man was himself cut down by a sharp, downward stab. "Come, Nicholas!"

"Do not leave me!" Paul's panicked shriek and his fumblings with the saddle unnerved Nicholas's horse and it shied aside, making it impossible for him to mount.

Nicholas searched the area. They would soon be surrounded by infidels, each one of them glad to roll their two Christian heads onto the sand. "Take this." Nicholas turned the hilt of his sword toward Paul and held it down near the stirrup. "Defend yourself!"

she accepted the gift. Behind her,Janette flashed him a warning look.

Nick ignored her, as he had any number of chaperons in the past. "Would you do me the honor," He put on his best manners, "Of being my guest for this evening?"

Gwen looked to Janette briefly and then faced Nick to nod a silent acceptance. She pulled her hair back to fix the hair-comb in it. Immediately, strands of her hair pulled loose to curl around her face like a pale halo. A longer strand went past her ear in a line down her neck. The young woman held out her arm with the wrist neutrally on the inside and Nick formally took her arm.

"Shall we go?" Nick led Gwen forward and looked back once in a brief farewell to Janette.

Janette could not decide whether the look held triumph or the beginnings of panic.

A horse-drawn carriage was parked in front of the Raven, complete with driver holding the reigns. The driver laughed when Gwen headed straight for the horse to pet her nose and talk to her.

"You sure know how to show a girl a good time," He teased Nick, holding out some sugar cubes for him to pass along to Gwen.

The sugar cubes were accepted immediately. "What's her name?" Gwen asked.

With some pride, the driver said, "Emily."

"Emily?" Nick repeated doubtfully.

The driver looked from Gwen to Nicholas and softly began to quote Emily Dickinson, "*Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me/ The carriage held but just ourselves and Immortality.*"

Nick paled and had to clear his throat to ask, "Do you want to go for a carriage ride?"

Gwen nodded eagerly and, with one last pat on the nose for Emily, let herself be helped into the carriage.

Nick settled himself on the seat beside her. "Driver, take us to the fair." He turned to Gwen. "There's a Renaissance Fair running tonight. Would you like to go?"

"Yes." Her answer seemed restrained, as though to hold off disappointment.

"There will be dancing," Nick offered.

"Oh?" A spark of hope lit her face. "With minstrels and jesters? And lords and ladies?"

"Yes." Nick smiled, relieved and pleased that he had chosen an evening she would like. Janette had no patience for nostalgia.

"Was it really like that?"

The question was unexpected. "What?"

Gwen halted for a moment, watchful for an angry response to her question. "Janette said that you were a knight, once, and that you lived in a castle. Was it really like that?"

The once-crusader considered the question, knowing the dreamscape that had been made of the time long past. He remembered smoky banquet halls with greasy food when napkins and silverware hadn't been invented yet. He remembered what a hall full of people smelled like when the pond had been frozen over all winter and there was no indoor plumbing.

He also remembered how it felt when he first rode in a tournament as a full knight. He remembered bowing before the king himself before leaving for the Crusades.

"Not everyday," He admitted. "But sometimes ... sometimes it could be like that."

"Sometimes," Gwen repeated it softly, like a wish, and closed one hand tightly as though to hold on to it.

Nick moved closer to Gwen. If he were to fulfill his promise tonight, he would have to overcome his habit of keeping a distance from human beings. She stiffened when he put his arm around her shoulders.

"We have all night," He whispered a reassurance. She made a swift, nervous bob of the head, which was as much of trust as she had to offer.

"Will it hurt?" Nick had to lean close to hear the question. Her scent was the scent of roses.

"I won't hurt you," He said earnestly. "I promise." Gwen responded with silence, reminding Nick that this was a promise she had seen made and broken too many times. He pulled his arm away and moved to the opposite side of the carriage.

Gwen reached after him and held onto his hand as she had held onto her wish. The cut showed in a brief line on her wrist. "I used to read Sleeping Beauty." Nick leaned closer to hear her. "She pricked her finger and the thorns grew up around her and nothing could touch her." Gwen held her head down and her shoulders curved protectively. "I wanted that. To be somewhere that I knew was safe. Where I could sleep and nothing could touch me."

"If I ... kiss you, you won't wake up," Nick warned her softly.

"I know." She met his eyes directly. "But nothing will ever hurt me again."

"Sir and lady," The coachman announced with a raised voice. "We have arrived." He brought Emily to a stop and came around to unlatch the carriage door. He bowed elaborately. "Enjoy the fair." He cheekily captured Gwen's hand and made a bow over it. "Mademoiselle, it has been my pleasure."

Gwen bowed back to him and then went up to the horse to pet her one last time. "Goodbye, Emily," She whispered into the animal's ear.

"I'll be back for both of you before night's end," The coachman told Nick in an undertone. "You'll be going back to the Raven?"

"Yes," The admission was uncomfortable to Nick. He amended it hastily, "Just this once."

"You're missed," The coachman informed him.

Nick frowned as though a servant had spoken out of turn and went to collect Gwen.

The fair was spread out in colorful disarray, looking to Nick as though children of the modern age had gotten into the trunk of his memories to play dress-up.

Here, a knight walked past, the pieces of his battered armor repaired by duct tape. There, a maiden walked by wearing a hand-stitched dress and eyeglasses with plastic frames. A guard stood at attention, wearing a coat of greaves. Closer inspection showed that the copper scales with which the coat was oversewn had once been computer circuit boards.

Nick found himself wishing that he had been able to bring Erica here before she had decided to walk into the sun. Perhaps here she could have seen that the past and the future have a place together.

Gwen gawked at everything, plainly delighted by the pageant around her. "It's beautiful," She whispered.

"I like to come here," He confessed to her with a shrug, "It's not quite like I remember it but ..."

"Sometimes," She finished for him and he nodded.

Gwen and her escort drifted into the fair, attaching themselves to

the audience for a puppet show. Nick grinned as he recognized Punch and Judy, little changed since the first time he had seen them.

Punch was an ill-tempered fellow who was always disagreeing with his wife, Judy. This time, it seemed, the dog had stolen some sausages that Punch had intended for his own supper. He went after his wife with a stick while she defended herself with a frying pan. The familiar slapstick and the ridiculous high-pitched voices had Nick laughing along with the children.

"It's not funny," Gwen whispered fiercely. She pulled away roughly from Nicholas and set a quick pace away from the puppet show. Nick went after her and reached out toward her but she pulled away again. "It's not funny."

"What's wrong?" Nick was bewildered. "It's only a puppet show.

"What do you know?" Gwen hissed. "What do you care? You get what you want, just like on the street. Well, this time," She fingered her wrist, "This time I get what I want!"

Behind them, at a distance, Punch had caught up with Judy and was making use of his big stick. "No, no, no!" His wife wailed her protests. Shivering, Gwen glared at the vampire and he felt as though he had taken a solid blow himself.

"I'm sorry," He began.

"Just shut up!" Gwen backed away. "What do you care?"

Nick stayed where he was, maintaining the distance between himself and Gwen. "I promised that I wouldn't hurt you and I meant it." His voice was soft. "If you wait by the fountain, the coachman will take you back to the Raven and you can pick someone else."

Alarmed, Gwen took one step toward him, holding out her wrist. "Hey, we had a deal!"

"I should never have made it." Nick stared at the thin, red line and the taste at the back of his mouth soured. "Janette can find some one else."

"No, come one." Gwen went toward Nick with streetwalker sway in her hips. She pressed herself against him and slid her hands slowly up his back. Heat spread out from her touch. "What do you need? I'll give it to you." She looked up at the vampire and the waif had been displaced by a sly, sinuous kitten. Her heartbeat thrummed through their contact. "Just do this for me."

"Stop it!" In a panic, Nick broke away from her hold. When he saw her flinch and brace for a blow, he continued more softly, "I don't want anything from you."

Her cynical laugh was as much a shield as her upraised arm had been. "You just doing this for a favor?"

He considered this. It could be counted as a favor to Janette, who had forgotten compassion, or to Erica, who had died alone, or to Paul, who still cried for mercy in his dreams. "You can owe me one."

Gwen shook her head. She could no understand this. "I hope the taste is sweet, because I won't be doing any favors after tonight." Such a blunt statement to come from one who, legal age or not, still seemed a child to the ancient vampire. He already regretted his promise to be the death of her.

"Do you still want to go through with it?" He asked.

"Yes," She answered firmly. "Do you?"

"We have a deal," He answered simply.

His answer reassured the girl and she fell in step with him to walk through the fair. They stopped briefly to watch a fire-eater and

then moved on to watch a tightrope walker. Gwen had eased enough to stand close to Nicholas and, mindful of his promise, he put an arm around her. He touched her gingerly even so for she seemed delicately made and as brittle as glass.

"I used to fall down a lot." Nick thought at first that Gwen was talking about the tightrope walker, who had added a chair to his efforts. "Gwen fell down the stairs. Gwen ran into the door. Gwen is so clumsy." She mimicked the intonation of a pat excuse, often repeated.

"Did you tell anyone?" Nick kept his voice neutral, his attention on the performer.

"If you tell, they'll take you away," Her voice continued the mimic. "If you tell, no one will believe you. If you tell," She shuddered, "I won't love you anymore."

"So you ran away." Every cop on the force knew the end to this story. Everyone of them hated their helplessness to change it.

"Yes. That was stupid." The softness had disappeared again under a hard edge. "I didn't have anywhere to run to."

"Where are your parents now?" Nick knew the question was a mistake when Gwen threw him a sharp look.

"You're not a cop, are you?" Her voice plainly said that she would rather trust a vampire than a cop.

He spread out his hands in a "no weapons" gesture. "Do I look like a cop?"

"There's just one. Her," Scorn, contempt and hate emphasized in one syllable, "Her and her boyfriends." The low mimic began again, "Come here, little girl. Let me kiss it and make it better."

Gwen shuddered again and Nick tactfully moved away from contact with her. She snatched at his hand and caught it, holding the inside of her wrist against his and sending the faint echo of her pulse up his arm.

The tightrope walker finished with a flourish and the couple moved on to watch a juggler. The performer was dressed in an artful patchwork that was almost as colorful as the banter he kept up. Gwen was snagged as a volunteer to throw items from a tray on stage into the flow of his juggling.

She was embarrassed and delighted to participate and accepted suggestions from the audience about which item to throw in next. The juggler handled them all with aplomb until the tray was empty.

To shouts of approval from the crowd, she then threw in the tray. The crowd shouted even louder when he juggled that by passing off the other items to Gwen. With a flourish, he caught the tray and with it the remaining items and dropped into a bow. At his encouragement, Gwen bowed with him. Nicholas was whistling and applauding along with the crowd.

Nick met Gwen as she stepped off the stage and she stumbled into him, leaning heavily on his arms. "What is it?" He whispered urgently.

"My legs," She grimaced. "I have to sit." The juggler was holding the attention of the audience with request for donations while Nick almost carried the young woman to a bench.

"What's wrong? Can I help?" Nick had never been a true doctor, but he could listen for a faltering pulse and catch the scent of the changes some diseases made in the body.

"No, It's just part of what's killing me." Gwen leaned into his embrace and, muffling the sound into his shirt, let go of a long scream. Even that seemed to exhaust her and she rested on Nick's supporting arms.

"I can help you," he insisted. "I can get rid of the pain."

Wearily, Gwen nodded consent and tilted her head back to bare her throat. Nick rested his hand on the pulse beat. "Look at me," He commanded and she obeyed "Listen to me. There is no more pain. You do not feel the pain." As he spoke, her face smoothed into calm. "Rest for a while." She tried to protest this, but he repeated his command, "Rest."

As Nick held her, they watched the preparations go by for a parade that was to run through the fair. "Cheri had it, too." Gwen's voice was slow, working against the lethargy he had placed on her. "When she couldn't walk anymore, Tommy was real mad." Gwen halted for a breath and went on. "I visited her when I could. That made him mad, too. 'No play, no pay,' he said." Nick made a note to light a fire under the vice squad to make Tommy a special project.

Gwen laced her fingers into Nick's. "I was with her when she died. I think she knew. I hope so. Tommy"

"That was over a year ago?" That must have been when she had been beaten and left at the Raven for the first time.

"Yes. Then I got sick. When I told Tommy I couldn't work, he was really mad." Probably her second time at the Raven. Nick caught himself thinking that if Tommy was using the dumpster so often, maybe he'd like to visit inside the Raven.

"Without Cheri, I'd die alone." She shivered and squeezed Nick's hand. "That scares me."

"There are places to go," Nick prompted gently, "With people who care." Janette said that she had sent the young woman to such a place.

"They might have called her." Gwen shook her head. "They were just a bunch of strangers."

"So am I," Nick reminded her.

Gwen shrugged. "We have a deal."

The parade began, more boisterous and colorful than any medieval pageant Nick remembered. The same ahead-of-time blending that prevailed in the rest of the fair was also present here. Tumblers and mummers marched alongside kabuki dancers. A merry group of troubadours strolled by, holding forth on "Louie, Louie". Knights rode past on wooden horses pulled on wheels.

Gwen was cheered by the pageant and gradually was able to sit up on her own. The finale of the parade was a Chinese dragon that flowed and rocketed its was through the assembled spectators.

"I saw a dragon once," Nick remembered.

Gwen shifted to stare at him. "Did you kill it?"

"What?" Her question broke his reverie and he laughed. "No. In China, dragons are benevolent and wise. They also protect things. I wanted to ask him for advice."

"A dragon?" Her eyes were wide and incredulous.

"Yes," Nick smiled at her with a teasing light in his eyes. Clearly, she wasn't sure whether to believe him or not.

"What did you ask?" She questioned him warily.

Nick was silent for a moment, almost serious again. "I asked him if I could be human again."

"What did he tell you?" Gwen wasn't sure that she wasn't feeding him the straight line to some strange joke.

Nick looked away from her, following the disappearing tail of the dragon. "Dragons don't know everything."

"Can you stand?" The vampire changed the subject abruptly. "The

musicians will be setting up over there." He pointed in the direction that the parade had gone.

"Yes!" Gwen stood up too suddenly and teetered uncertainly for a moment. Nick steadied her and watched anxiously as she took each step. He watched her long enough to assure himself that she was recovered and not walking only on the strength of his mind tricks.

The first set was an exhibition of formal dancing given by costumed performers. In the next set, the troubadours from the parade were singing 'old songs in a new way and new songs in an old way'. This included an almost-Beatles tune, 'Thou Canst Not Buy Me Love', a country and western version of 'Greensleeves' and a 'really, we mean it' old tune about a knight of the wooden shield.

Gwen had clapped and sung along with the rest of the crowd and was well along in the first verse before she caught Nick squirming with embarrassment. "**What?**"

The once-crusader shook his head ruefully. "That song!"

The crowd chanted gleefully along with the singer, *"Knight of the wooden shield, will you yield? / Knight of the wooden shield, cede the field? / I am the better man, conquer me if you can / Knight of the wooden shield!"*

"What about it?" Gwen demanded.

"When we were learning to use our weapons properly, we would fight against a thing like a tackling dummy. It was built on a pivot." Gwen paid him all her attention as he explained. "If you didn't hit it just right, it would swing around and hit you ...uhm. from behind." Gwen began to giggle and Nick quickly decided that his embarrassment was a fair trade if it made her laugh.

"The other boys would chant this song from the sidelines while you fought the wooden knight." He shook his head again as the crowd returned to the chorus. "I ate a lot of dust back then."

"But you won later, didn't you?" Gwen persisted.

"Yes." He had advanced to real weapons and real opponents and later to real enemies. "But the smart soldier never forgets what it was like to land on his ...uhm... dignity." Gwen laughed again and Nick relished the sound.

For the next set, instrumental pieces were played and the audience was invited to enter the dance floor. Nick, with a shamelessly overdone bow, invited Gwen to dance.

She blushed. "I don't know how. Not to this."

"Follow me," He insisted gallantly.

The young woman proved to be a quick study in the measured steps, carefully following the pattern her partner set. They danced to three pieces and were soon attracting admiration from the reenactors.

"Step closer," Nick whispered, full of mischief. "Stand on my feet." This form was not at all accurate to the period. The waltz had caused a great enough scandal after its introduction much later when a man put his hand on a lady's waist. Nonetheless, Nick followed the music, subtly rising off the floor with each step.

When the surrounding crowd applauded, Gwen looked around and gasped to find herself dancing nearly a foot above the dance floor. Nick grinned at her and began to go lower with each step until her and his partner touched the ground. The crowd applauded again as the couple took a bow.

Nick saw the stiffness in Gwen's movement and waved and nodded and subtly pushed a way through to the seats surrounding the dance floor.

"Are you all right?" Nick looked her over in concern.

The young woman tried to smile, but the pain had returned to her eyes. "That was the best time I ever had."

"Look at me." She rested in the shelter of his arm, but even this close to her, he could only smell roses. "There is no pain. You feel no pain."

Gwen looked bewildered for a moment before accepting his command. Her body was providing enough "empirical evidence" to resist his efforts. The vampire released Gwen when she could sit comfortably in her chair.

"Better?" She nodded. "Can I get you something? Some ... tea?" Natalie would laugh to hear that.

"Gingerbread?" Gwen pointed to a nearby food vendor. "I've never had gingerbread and it smells so good."

"Does it?" In spite of Natalie's best efforts, Nick could not appreciate the smell of food except in the way that humans smell flowers: pretty, but not for eating. "I'll get you some, then."

Nicholas returned with the gingerbread and reclaimed his seat opposite Gwen. He noted with some satisfaction that she was entranced by the music. He settled back to listen and with a shock realized that he recognized himself in this ballad as well.

The players were singing the story of Tam Lin, a mortal knight who had fallen in company with the queen of air and darkness. Only after joining her service did he learn that every seven years, the queen owed a tithe to hell and paid it with one of her knights.

"Nick? Are you all right?" It was Gwen's turn to look with concern at Nicholas, who had gone as pale as ash.

Nick tried to mouth some reassurance, but found he could only nod shakily. Gwen reached across to him and took his hand. He gripped her hand more strongly than he'd meant to, desperate for the lifeline she offered. In concern and bewilderment, she turned again to hear the music.

As the ballad continued, Tam Lin's mortal sweetheart was told that, if she were to rescue him, she must approach the dark queen's procession and pull her man away. In her arms, he would change into something ferocious and deadly, but if she held on to him, her love would win his freedom.

"Nick?" Gwen whispered, "Was that you?"

He tried again to voice an answer, but could only shake his head vigorously. "No one," He rasped, "Came to pull me free."

She closed her free hand around his arm with a firm grip. "What do I do?"

Her offer cut, even as it healed him, to see her reaching out from her own helplessness. "Nothing." His eyes darkened. "It was all a long, long time ago."

Gwen let him sit in silence for some time before asking, "What is it like?"

The vampire searched her expression, guessing at the motive for her question.

"You can fly," She prompted.

"Yes," He nodded.

"You can read minds," The young woman continued.

He shook his head. "Only when I've tasted the blood. What I did for you is," An explanation was difficult, "Different."

"Do you get sick?" Gwen tried to keep a neutral expression.

"No," Nick's answer was simple. He waited for her next question.

"Do you get hungry?"

He was aware again of the throb of her pulse against his arm. He freed his arm to touch only her hand, further from the fresh cut. "Did you ever do drugs?"

Gwen shook her head. "Tommy said that if we had money for drugs, we were holding out on him. He didn't like that."

"Have you ever seen someone who's high?" When the young woman nodded, he went on, "You feel strong and important and like the world is yours." Nick felt the old, dark memories reaching out to snare him again. "It feels like you can't get enough. But you have to, because if you don't, it starts to hurt. You'll do anything--kill--if it will just stop hurting."

"Janette," Gwen faltered, "She doesn't act like a junkie."

"Have you ever seen her hands shake when she drinks the house wine?" Nick challenged her. "She needs fresh."

Terror lit Gwen's eyes briefly but she asked, "Can you change me, so I wouldn't be sick? So that I'll be like you?"

"No," These were newer memories, of just as dark a weave. "Janette can. I will ask her, if you want."

"Then I would be like her." Gwen squeezed her eyes shut. Nick heard the same inflection that the young woman had used to refer to her only parent. He could imagine the reaction of Punch to a wife who could turn on him with bared fangs. He could imagine Tommy's reaction to one of his girls going for his throat. Gwen shook herself and opened her eyes. "I'd rather die." Nick felt a surge of relief at her decision.

"Are you clean now?" She continued his reference to the blood hunger as a drug habit.

"I'm trying," Nick shrugged. "It's hard. It's been a long time since I've seen the sun."

"Did you ever try to end it?" End the hunger, end the pain, as she was asking him to do for her.

"Almost two years ago," Of all the stories of his life, he and Natalie never spoke of this, "A gang was causing trouble. Innocent people were in danger. I told myself that I only wanted to help those people. But they were safely away when the gang leader threw a pipe bomb at me." He hesitated, even now, to make the confession. "I threw myself on it just before it went off."

"It couldn't kill you?" Gwen asked in confusion.

"Fire can kill me. I thought that maybe ... I woke up in a body bag." He smiled fondly. "Gave the coroner quite a start."

"What did he do?" The young woman wondered.

"She offered to help me find a cure." Said aloud, the idea still seemed ludicrous.

"There is no cure for me," Gwen murmured.

"That's what I said, when she offered it." Nick challenged her, "But she's become my friend as well as my conscience. She's kept me sober."

Gwen shook her head, bewildered, "How do you find a reason to live another day?"

"Because ..." Reasons failed him. He had found that he loved life too much to let it go, even when despair filled him like a poison in the blood. "Because that might be the day that I see the sun rise."

"And get burned for it." Gwen had read fairy tales, but didn't believe in the happy ever after.

"What about your friend, Cheri? Did she try to end it?" By Gwen's account her friend had not fled to the Raven.

"She wouldn't leave me." Gwen curved her shoulders protectively again. "She found a hospice. She said that they were nice to her there. They didn't ask stupid questions. They let me visit anytime."

"She was lucky to have you as a friend." Nicholas touched her cheek briefly with his hand. Gwen closed her fingers tightly as though she still held an unmade wish.

The fair around them was showing signs of dispersing. "Do you want to start toward the fountain? The lights should still be on."

He helped Gwen to her feet and offered his arm to support her. As they walked the distance to the fountain without talking, Nick watched the young woman anxiously for any signs of discomfort. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, "That was the best time I ever had." She laced her fingers with his and admired the play of the water rising and falling in the colored lights. The young woman put out her free hand to catch the falling water and playfully splashed some at Nick. He shouted and shielded himself ineffectually with one arm, even as he revelled in her delighted laughter.

"I wish I could stand in it," She said carelessly.

"Why not?" He gestured with a sweep of his arm. "There's no one else here."

Gwen scanned the area in a quick, guilty glance before pulling off her shoes, rolling up her pantlegs, and stepping into the water. "Oh!" The surprised shock of indrawn breath. "It's cold!" She held out her arms and the water rained around her, leaving her holding bubbling waterfalls.

She made a neat pirouette through the pattern of the fountain to end in front of Nicholas with her arms held out to him.

Nick lifted her out of the fountain, giving in to the compulsion to swing her around once. He was immediately fearful that she would fly away on her own, for she had no more weight in his arms than a kite.

He set her down on a bench by the fountain and kneeled down to be about the business of putting her tennis shoes back on. When the last lace was tied, she angled her foot like a lady admiring her new slipper.

"It fits," She said solemnly. "That means you have to kiss me." She turned her face to him as he still knelt before her and closed her eyes.

Nick picked up her left hand and settled it onto her right, holding them both in his own hands. He leaned forward to kiss the girl properly on the lips, proving that the lessons of the Court of Chivalry had not been entirely lost on a young crusader, after all.

He pulled back again and shivered to see her arch her neck back, graceful as a gosling, the find down of her hair glowing from the lights of the fountain. She had not forgotten that, by their bargain, he owed her one more kiss.

Nick pushed past her hesitation and circled her with his arms, feeling again the thin brittleness of her shoulders. He brushed his mouth against her throat, taking a first taste of the skin stretched over the pulse. Her heart fluttered and jumped under his touch, a small bird battering against a cage of bone. He choked and pulled away, covering his mouth with one hand.

She did not move except to whisper, "You promised."

This un-life of Nick's had been full of broken promises, starting

with the oath that he had sworn on the cross of his sword. Could the way back now require the keeping of them all? His hand tensed to feel underneath it the frantic beating against the ribs of the cage.

Taking a breath that he didn't need, Nick set his mouth over her pulse and caught a fold of her skin in his teeth. The hunger that had always risen to tear its way out of him held back, wary as a beast that has caught man-scent.

He took another, deeper breath to fill his senses with the smell of her blood. To his horror, this breath caught in a sob, followed by another, flowing into a tearless weeping that he was helpless to stop. He held onto the girl, his fingers tangled in the fine strands of her hair.

She reached out, perhaps to comfort him, and clung to the front of his vest. The bone china under his hands seemed to shiver and crack and to pour out tears on him.

They held onto each other in shared sorrow until her sobbing quieted. Still holding her, Nicholas whispered, "I can't. I can't do this. I'll have to take you back to the Raven. Janette will have to choose someone else."He pulled away to look at Gwen for her forgiveness.

She acknowledged him with a stiff nod but did not speak or look at him directly. She began to rub her wrist carefully around the wound that had barely begun to heal.

"I'm sorry," He said again. "I didn't want to hurt you." As he said this, she began to shake and he sat on the bench beside her to let her rest in his arms.

The coachman arrived to find Nicholas still holding her. "Here, let me help you with ..." He trailed off in surprise. "She's still alive?" He gave a low whistle and Nick looked at him defiantly. "Herself isn't going to like that."

"You let me deal with her," Nick told him sharply. He picked up Gwen and brought her to the carriage, settling her in gently. "Take us back."

The coachman offered, "Do you want me to ...?"

"No," Gwen finally spoke, the one word and no more. The coachman nodded as he would at receiving orders and drove them in silence to the Raven.

Janette was waiting as they drove up, standing regally at the entrance. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Gwen move. She whispered dangerously, "Nicholas, I warned you. I don't take in strays."

Her building anger reminded Nick of the old tale of the queen who had commanded to bring her the heart of her rival. Moved by compassion, the huntsman had refused.

He stared back at her steadily. "You'll have to choose someone else."

She pursed her lips in impatient disapproval. "It's nearly dawn. They've all ... flown." Those that weren't sleeping it off in the cellar.

"Tomorrow is a new day," Nick observed. "Let her wait here."

Janette stood firm, blocking the entrance now. "She won't be safe here."

He drew a breath to argue, hesitated and said, "I'll stay with her."

"It's been a long time since you stayed in one of my clubs." Janette's expression was unreadable. She nodded once, shortly. "One day, that's all."

Nick went back to the carriage for Gwen. As they reached Janette, she stopped them with a hand on Gwen's shoulder. "You may stay until tomorrow night." She looked across to Nick. "I want to get this over with."

Gwen nodded without looking up. She followed Nick's lead into the club. Janette closed the door behind them.

"I suppose you'll want a bed." Janette said with a longsuffering sigh. "You'll have to make do with a couch in one of the parlor rooms."

"That will be fine," Nick said. "How about a blanket?"

Janette glared at him. "Will a tablecloth do?"

"Perfect," He had the temerity to smile at her as he said it.

The mistress of the Raven settled the two of them in a parlor room with the warning, "Don't wander around during the day. Don't go in the collar." She gave Nicholas a sour frown. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

As soon as she had left, Nick moved one of the divans across the doorway. He was careful to explain to Gwen, "I'm going to sleep here. If any one comes in here, I'll know. Otherwise," He shrugged, "I sleep like the dead."

Gwen grasped his arm, the heartbeat in her wrist fluttering against his skin. "Do you want any company?"

Nick bowed over her hand and kissed it softly. "No one will come near you tonight, I promise." He backed away and after folding his vest neatly over the back of the divan, he settled into the cold stillness that served him for sleep.

He woke to find Janette shaking him impatiently, "She's gone." Nick blinked blearily. Waking the dead was never easy. "Your little street urchin has gone." He was not too disoriented to note that Gwen had now become 'his'.

"Did you look in the dumpster?" He mumbled.

Janette pulled him to a sitting position and shook him once again to be sure that he could hear her. "Don't bring her back, Nicholas. I've used up my charity. If you find her, you can adopt her or kill her as you wish, but don't bring her back."

He nodded to show that he understood and stumbled to his feet to show that he was awake. Janette surveyed him sharply. "Now I remember why it's been so long since you stayed in one of my clubs."

The morning after is always a shock." He wasn't about to be civil until he'd gotten some breakfast.

She glowered at him. "I was going to offer you a drink."

Nick smiled and traced her cheek with one finger. "Too rich for my blood."

She snapped a mock bite at his finger and left with the warning, "Don't bring her back, Nicholas."

Nick flew home and broke into his private stock for an easy breakfast. He called in sick and flew around the city, searching for Gwen. He worried that she had left because he had not kept their bargain. He was afraid that she went to seek her own death rather than the one Janette would offer.

The vampire asked around until he had found Tommy and had a long talk with him. Tommy said that he had not seen Gwen. He said that he did not know where she was. He promised that he would never hurt her again. He promised that he would never hurt any of his girls again. He promised to tell the next uniform he saw every detail of his business.

Nick talked to Tommy's girls, but they only knew that Gwen had said goodbye before she had left for the Raven. They had not seen her

since.

He returned to his loft, perilously close to dawn, frustrated with his failure. Would she show up in the morgue, as another anonymous suicide?

When Nick reported for work, he was again frustrated when a search using police files turned up nothing. The only bright spot in the shift was Tommy's arrest report.

He was left, at last, with an appeal to his Conscience. The policeman opened the door to her lab with the newly learned reflex of watching for flying glassware. Assured that the coast was clear, he entered.

Natalie looked up at him casually at first and then took a second look, one of concern. "What's wrong? You look ragged."

Nick chose his words carefully. "I need to find someone. She's a streetwalker -- well, she was. She's sick. She's dying." His hands twisted together. "She came to me for help and I couldn't give it. She shouldn't be alone. She might try to"

Natalie stopped him with a raised hand. "No Jane Doe's were brought in tonight." Nick closed his eyes in grateful relief. "I can get off early. Let's ask at the Lighthouse."

They were met at the shelter by the senior volunteer on duty. It was the eager young priest who had once invited Nicholas into his church. "We did have a young woman come in. We had to bandage a cut on her wrist. If it was a suicide attempt, it wasn't wholehearted." Nick looked away from Natalie's questioning look. "She agreed to enter a hospice. We're not equipped to care for physical ailments here. If you're her friend," He turned to Nicholas, no less anxious for him, "She could use one."

Nicholas entered the hospice a bare hour before dawn while Natalie waited nervously outside. He was standing uncertainly by Gwen's bedside when she opened her eyes to look at him. Her smile held all the warmth for him that her laughter did. "I wished you to come."

He took her hand gently. "I came to keep our bargain."

Fear troubled her features and she looked questioningly at him.

"I promised," He explained, "That you would not die alone."

She smiled again, "They're okay here; nicer than her, but they're still strangers."

He squeezed her hand carefully. "We have a deal."

The once-crusader kept his word faithfully from dusk to dawn, visiting before, after, and occasionally during his shift, using what had been an unnecessary meal break. He told her stories from his childhood, some that had been told to him, and some in which he had played a part. He held her when the pain bit deep and used what power he had to relieve it. He accepted her tears when they came and coaxed her laughter when he could.

He held her as she died, feeling the faint flutter of her pulse go still as it finally won free from its earthbound cage. He released his hold of her only when dawn threatened.

Natalie joined him at Gwen's grave that night. "I took care of the arrangements exactly as you requested." She put an arm around him, still the closest touch they dared. "I'm sorry, Nick."

He accepted her sympathy solemnly. Each time he cared for a mortal, he felt pain when they died, Yet, enough of humanity was left to him, that when he tried to stop caring, he could not.

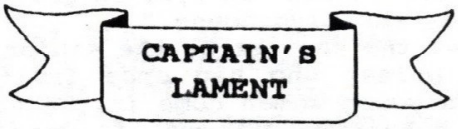
"Why did you want a rosebush on her grave, Nick?" His friend was

curious.

"I promised her that she would rest like Sleeping Beauty, with thorns to hedge her in safety." He bent down to finger the lettering cut into the marker. He quoted aloud what he remembered of Emily Dickinson, "*Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me / The carriage held but just ourselves / And Immortality.*"

He trailed away but recovered himself to continue, "*We paused before a house that seemed / A swelling of the ground / The roof was scarcely visible / The cornice -- in the ground -- /*"

He stood and tossed a final handful of earth on the grave. "*Since then -- 'tis centuries -- and yet / Feel's shorter than the Day / I first surmised the horses heads / Were toward. Eternity .*"



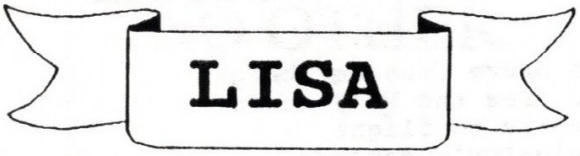
Oh sure, he's just a little strange,
But even if I could arrange,
To find out what all makes him tick,
I doubt I ever would know Nick.

He has this skin condition, see;
Well, that's the story he tells me;
Which means he has to work at night
Avoiding at all costs, daylight.

He doesn't act much like the rest
No donut stops, Schanke attests.
But, oh that mind that will not quit,
Makes up for all that doesn't fit.

So in the end, it's to the good
I do not ask more than I should.
So I accept without remorse,
And have the best cop on the force.

by *Kathleen Y. Bergeron*



by *Pam Jensen*

September 15th, 1954

Dear Diary,

It's the first day of my Sophomore year at the University of Chicago. I'm always so excited to meet my new professors. This time I got all the classes I registered for, although Mabel only got two from her list. Poor dear, I know how disappointing that can be.

It took three tries to get into Professor Henry Jones' Archaeology Seminar. Imagine my disappointment when the Dean of the Department arrived and announced Dr. Jones was going to be away on some dig in England. I suppose it is very important to the University, and probably prestigious for the Doctor's professional record, or something like that. Still, all the girls just rave about how cute he is, and I did have to wait ever so long just to get into his class.

Diary, it came as a delightful discovery when our substitute professor was introduced. He's Professor Nick Girard, and what a dreamboat. Dr. Girard is tall, and blond, and has a wonderful sense of humor. His special field of expertise is the Mayans, and South America. This semester is really going to be fun.

One of the Seniors said Dr. Girard has an Honors Study Group for whom he is teaching French History, and another for the Crusades. It seems a strange mixture of topics for one man to be so well-versed in. Still, I'm sure the University wouldn't allow him to teach the subjects if he weren't fully qualified.

Oh -- and the Doctor is also the Assistant Professor/Night Curator at the C.U. Archaeological Museum. I envy the Graduate Students who get to work nights with this dreamy man...

Sigh Diary, you'll definitely be hearing more later about my fav prof...

Lisa

DEAD, WHITE, EUROPEAN MALES

Oh, once there was a brave Crusader knight
Who swore an oath to free the Holy Lands,
To put the heathen enemy to flight,
And answer all of chivalry's demands.
Or that's how he was painted long ago
But there's another side that you should know . . .

He's a dead, white, European male
Unnumbered are his crimes
Another dead, white, European male
Cursed by modern times.

Amid the ancient splendor that was Rome
Was one who poured out human blood like wine.
A man who was the voice behind the throne
May be the one to blame for Rome's decline!
This one who had a smile as thin as ice
Thought cruelty an art and not a vice.

This ancient dead, white, European male
The terror of the night
For this dead, white, European male
Ruled by appetite!

A beauty with her hair of raven silk
Her heart too cold to welcome any love,
Her skin as pure and white as cobra's milk,
A hand of steel within a velvet glove.
'Though some would say she stocks her cellar well,
The ones who fill the cellar do not tell . . .

(For the female of the species is more deadly than the . . .)
Dead, white, European male
Empowerment the prize.
Woe the dead, white, European male
Who would patronize!

by *Winifred McBeth*

To scan with the English folksong: ***Head Tucked Underneath Her Arm****, about Anne Boleyn*

NO OTHER WAY

by

Kathleen Y. Bergeron

Detective Nick Knight was edgy. He felt like an entire acre of butterflies had taken up residence in the pit of his stomach or as if hidden eyes were peering out at him from every angle, even in the squad room. This was, of course, ridiculous. Aside from his partner, Don Schanke, the Captain and other cops wandering in and out, there was nothing at all going on tonight, or last night, or even the night before, which was when he remembered this touchy feeling in his gut. *Maybe I shouldn't take any time off*, he told himself. *Seems to make me jumpy*. An ordinary man might have attributed it to fatigue or stress or any one of a hundred things that might be considered occupational hazards of his chosen profession. *Cops*, Nick thought, *must be 50% of the practice of some doctors who deal with those sort of problems, after all, between ulcers and high blood pressure and the like*. But then, as he reminded himself, he was certainly not an average police detective, and not human at all. There were few things in this mortal world he dwelled in that really upset him. Yet after 800 years and more, this feeling was like some indefinable pit of apprehension that was, at once, familiar and feared, something half-remembered as if from some nightmare long ago.

Hey, partner. Where are you at anyway?" Schanke inquired as he wandered in from the hallway, candy bar in hand. "You know what you need is a chocolate fix. Want a bite?"

Nick grimaced at the idea and forced his mind to focus on the grinning face of his friend. "No, thanks, Schanke." He smiled as he shook his head, "And you know what Myra said about junk food." He punched his friend gently in the stomach with his knuckles, "Maybe you ought to think about those yummy carrot sticks she brown-bags for you every night?"

"Yeech, no, thank you, not for Don Schanke! I categorically refuse to graze for nourishment, thank you very much. Don Schanke is not a rabbit."

"If I'm not interrupting this fascinating exchange," Captain Stonetree tossed a file folder on Nick's desk. "We seem to have a serial killer in the wings here and since you two aren't exactly occupied, why don't you check on the latest?"

"I thought the killings were mostly crosstown out of our jurisdiction," Nick replied, picking up the folder and scanning it faster than either of the two men could imagine.

"Yep, until today. This one looks like the pattern in the others though. Some wacko with a blood fetish or something."

At the mention of the word 'blood', Nick's eye widened involuntarily. "What do you mean?" He had only heard vague mention of a possible serial killer in the area before, but no specifics. Maybe now he knew where this feeling of dread was coming from. Maybe there was another of his kind nearby.

"Oh, I don't know. Apparently the throats have been half ripped apart, and there was a huge loss of blood in the bodies. Anyway, this perp is operating in our backyard now and that makes this one our baby. This guy seems to prefer young males, and this new victim follows the pattern."

"Has Natalie autopsied any of the bodies?" Nick asked. He thought it odd that Natalie had not called him when she noticed the obvious. *Oh, yeah*, he reminded himself. *Nat had been off on vacation for the past week, but she should have picked up on this right away when she got back to work tonight.* Nat, of all people, was usually so attuned to anything strange since he'd come into her life.

"Nah, she's been off. Come to think of it, I think she was due back from vacation tonight. Maybe you should check with her."

But when Nick and Schanke walked into the morgue expecting to see Dr. Natalie Lambert, they were informed that she had not shown up for work that night and all phone calls to her apartment had been taken by the machine.

"Schank, why don't you go and check out the scene and let me drop by Nat's on the way."

"You think something's funny?"

"Probably not. Maybe she had car trouble coming home or something." He tried to make his voice confident, but had trouble convincing himself.

"Yeah, all right, I'll go check it out myself, but don't take forever. I'm not getting any younger. Besides, I'm hungry," Don muttered.

Nick drove considerably faster than the limit on the way to Natalie's apartment. All those queasy feelings in the pit of his stomach were churning more than ever and it seemed like the closer he got to her apartment, the worse they became. What was it that was bothering him so much? he wondered. Did it have something to do with Natalie? He had to get this protective feeling out of his head. *Who appointed me her personal guard, anyway?* He knew the answer to that question and it was reflected in a mirror when he walked by one. Although Natalie was the only mortal at the moment who knew his condition it was not that alone. *I can't have these feelings. It isn't safe for her or for me. Clouds my judgment, but what if something had happened to Nat?* That thought pushed his foot further down on the accelerator.

Repeated knocks at the apartment door got him nowhere, but the lock gave very easily to preternatural strength. The sight that greeted him was worse than that apprehensive feeling; the place was a mess. Natalie wasn't prone to excessive neatness, true, but this place was trashed, as if someone had been -- he hesitated before allowing himself to finish the thought -- fighting for his or her life. And the scent of fresh blood was unmistakable to the nostrils of this vampire.

Natalie's suitcases were sitting in the middle of the floor, as if they'd been set down as she'd turned to close the door behind her.

Could somebody have been waiting? But why? Nick asked himself. Natalie was the most respected coroner in the city, and certainly she didn't have any enemies that he knew about. He knew her security system was better than average too. He'd seen to that. It wouldn't have been all that easy to have gotten inside without tripping something, not for the average burglar at any rate. And from what he'd heard, this serial killer had little or no interest in attractive females.

Nick reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellular phone. Schanke was already on his way back to the station and Nick told his partner he'd meet him there. He wanted to make a stop along the way. If anybody would know about a renegade, it would be Janette. After one more look around, he turned to leave when Nat's phone rang. On an impulse and with unspoken hope that it might be Natalie herself, he picked up the receiver before the box could take the call.

"I thought you might be there, Nicholas." The voice at the other end of the line made all the nauseous feelings of the past days make sense. "Are you looking for someone?"

"LaCroix? No -- it isn't possible."

"And why not, dear Nicholas? Because you put an end to me by wood and flame? After all this time, don't you realize that I have powers of which you have no conception? Next time, my brave knight, be sure you burn the remains, and while you're at it, scatter the ashes to the four winds."

"Natalie -- you have Natalie."

"As a matter of fact, yes. It's taken me quite some time to decide how best to punish you, Nicholas, for your numerous transgressions and completely unnatural behavior. And then I remembered your unfortunate tendency to become involved with mortals. I must admit this time your taste has somewhat improved."

"LaCroix, what is it you want from me?"

"Why, nothing whatsoever, Nicholas, except the acknowledgement of your true nature, the gift you received, if you will recall, from me. That and... I think I would rather enjoy seeing you suffer just a bit. I don't think your own life is half as important to you as that of this female."

"Why would you think she matters to me?" Nick's denial sounded hollow, even to his own ears.

"Nicholas, please. Don't insult my intelligence. You know I could always read you and, though the idea is rather disgusting to me, I have ascertained that you are quite fond of her. And also, she is attempting to aid and abet your ridiculous efforts to become a mortal once again. How long will you waste time in this futile quest?" LaCroix didn't wait for a reply before continuing. "She deserves to die on that account alone."

"LaCroix, no. Please." He sighed, "Whatever you want from me, you can have. Let her go. She deserves better."

"Perhaps you're right, Nicholas. Perhaps I may give you that choice to make. Yes, perhaps you may see her again." The line went dead.

"LaCroix?!" Nick screamed into the now dead receiver, and slammed it down and sprinted out the door.

The Raven was a rather fashionable nightclub in a somewhat seedy

part of town which came to life only after dark. Nick found the atmosphere oppressive most of the time because it brought back bitter memories of a life he was trying hard to leave behind. But his fondness for its proprietress, Janette, was long-term, that of those once lovers now evolved into friends bonded by time and experience. More than once he had reason to call upon their centuries-old friendship, for like him, she too was a child of LaCroix. Nick entered unceremoniously and immediately spied the beautiful brunette in a corner, looking completely unsurprised to see him.

"Why didn't you tell me, Janette?" he inquired with no preliminaries.

"It's wonderful to see you tonight, as well, Nicholas."

"No games, Janette. Not this time. Did you know he was alive?"

Laughing softly, "My poor Nickola, none of us are alive and it is your fantasy to believe that we are which causes you so much misery."

"Stop it! You know what I mean."

"Yes, I have felt his presence for several months now, always in the shadows. I do not think he completely trusts me any longer or he would most probably have shown himself." Her French accent was subtle, and her tone resigned. "I think he feels I am far too close to you. I know he hates you, Nickola. I can feel the waves of hatred from him, he who once loved you well."

"I won't apologize for my actions, except I can't forgive myself for not finishing the job." His voice was bitter, "Janette, he has Natalie Lambert."

"Ah, the good doctor. Nickola, how often have I warned you against these feelings you seem to attach to mortals?"

"I was not aware my feelings for Natalie were that obvious."

"To those who know you best, of course. You are aware she is in love with you quite hopelessly?"

Nick closed his eyes. "Yes, I know she had feelings for me. I never intended for this to happen, but Natalie is... unlike any other woman I have ever known. I have fought these feelings in myself, but our friendship has become much more than that, as much as I have tried to deny it."

"Nickola, you see why feelings are such dangerous, treacherous things. LaCroix is very capable of using this weakness against you."

"Yes, I know. Please, Janette -- if he contacts you, call me. Please. And if you hear any rumors at all..."

"Yes, of course, Nickola. LaCroix enjoys the blood hunt a bit too much for my taste and definitely needs to begin living in the twentieth century. Also, his vendetta against you is a waste of energy and in dreadful taste." She leaned toward Nick, "But watch yourself, in the meantime."

Knight embraced and kissed her, filled again with apprehension. "Thank you, ma chérie."

When Nick walked into the station ten minutes later, Schanke pounced on him. "And where have you been, Knight? I thought you were coming straight back here. What was up at Natalie's anyway?"

Nick was distracted, "Sorry, Schanke. I guess Natalie must have gone out or something. Her suitcases are there so I left her a note. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation." He hated himself for half-truths, but the last thing he needed was his friend's involvement. One person he cared about being used as ammunition was enough and Schanke was not ready to hear the whole story. "What's up with the case?"

"Not many leads. Very messy though. I always think I've seen it all then some bozo crawls out from under a whole new rock. The lab guys are still crawling over the scene, but we should have some info by tomorrow night."

"Yeah, all right, I'll take care of the paperwork. Why don't you knock off early. Go home and take it easy. You look like hell, partner." He frowned, "You sure there's nothing else wrong?"

"No, no, I'm just a little tired, that's all. Vacations just take the edge off, you know? I'll be back into the swing by tomorrow. Thanks, Schanke." Nick hesitated, then continued, "Hey, you watch yourself, huh?" unconsciously echoing Janette's earlier warning.

Driving his Caddy home, Nick entered the street level parking area, and after making certain it was secured, entered his secret access door code. All was unchanged at his place, although what he'd expected to find different he did not know. There was no way LaCroix would have brought her here. He glanced out the window. Still an hour or two before dawn. Sitting here at home was more than he could take, so he decided that an aerial recon might yield some clues. He flew rapidly around the perimeters of the city and also walked around several of the crime scenes where the serial killer, obviously LaCroix, had struck in the last few weeks. *Why?* he repeatedly asked himself, *didn't I keep up on the details of those murders?* If he had, maybe he could have put the past and present together and would have been able to stop LaCroix before he was ready to put his plan into motion. He shook his head to clear it, knowing intellectually that hindsight is always 20/20. He glanced at his watch. *Almost dawn*, he thought. *Maybe it would be better if I just stayed here. Then LaCroix would have no reason to harm Nat. But, he'd kill her anyway just out of spite, and at least if I am here, there may be a way to keep her alive.*

He returned home and tried to settle down to sleep as the sky slowly began to change from ebony to grey to a rosy pink over the city. But every time he closed his eyes, Natalie's face clouded his mind. He saw her laughing with him. He saw the fascinated surprise there on the night they met and he had told her just who and what he was. He saw her grief when her brother Richard died, and her terror when Nick was forced to end the man's existence a second time. He allowed himself to see something else in those eyes which he had not been willing to acknowledge before; the affection there which no mortal woman had shown him in hundreds of years. If LaCroix could see and sense this, why had he failed to do so before now? He could have gone. Should have. As sleep finally overtook his exhausted mind, he realized that the one thing he had never seen was fear, horror, loathing, and he thought he could hear Nat's voice whispering his name.

He woke, startled, just after sundown. He was surprised he'd slept so deeply, as he often awoke long before time for work. He needed very little sleep. He realized that the voice in the dream was real. He could hear Natalie's voice calling from downstairs. He flew out of bed, off the balustrade and discovered her body lying just across his threshold. He picked her up, horrified by the gaping wounds in her neck and the thready pulse he could barely detect. He placed her on the sofa, but was so distracted by his discovery, he did not at first perceive the presence of his old mentor.

"You see, Nicholas, I told you that you would see her again." Nick furiously whirled around and lunged toward LaCroix, who easily outmaneuvered his former protègè. "Ah, Nicholas, calm yourself." He looked toward the unconscious woman across the room. "She is dying, you know. I have been quite precise in my calculations and I believe I have left just enough blood to sustain her life for a few more hours ." He smacked his lips, "And I assure you, it took tremendous restraint on my part."

Nick looked devastated. "And what have you gained, LaCroix, by her death?"

"Frankly, the look I see in your eyes at this moment is very nearly payment enough for my efforts, I must say. Almost."

Nick knelt next to the prone figure, a look of resignation on his face. "LaCroix, there is nothing more you can do to me."

"Actually, the way I see things, Nicholas, you have only three choices: you can sit here and watch the life drain from her. You can rush her to the nearest hospital, but -- there would be some awkward explanations and in any case, I would only come after her again." He paused for breath. "And there is a third possibility, of course."

"No!!" Nick shouted, and then more quietly, "You can't."

"Oh, no, not I, dear Nicholas. You. You can give her life eternal, just as I gave to you so long ago."

"The life I have to give is no life. Death is preferable." He glanced down at Natalie and looked back at LaCroix. "I cannot."

"Then she will die. Either way, you see, I will win. The pain for you which will come from losing her is probably equal to that which you will feel if you bring her across. You must choose and if you make her as you are, can you live with the guilt? If she dies, can you live with the loneliness? Quite a puzzle, isn't it, Nicholas?" He laughed nastily as his own cleverness. "Well thought-out, if I do say so myself."

Natalie moaned quietly, "Nick?"

Nick turned to her, and LaCroix continued, "And with that decision to make, I will leave you for now. Adieu, Nicholas, and may you be able to," he paused as if the word was abhorrent to his lips, "*live* with your choice." Faster than a human eye could have followed, he was gone, like smoke evaporating in the breeze.

Nick turned back to Natalie. "I'm here, Nat." She opened her eyes groggily.

"Was that **him**," she asked weakly.

"LaCroix," he replied. It was not a question. "Yes. Nat, I am so sorry."

"Nick, it wasn't your fault. So odd that you two are so alike and so different," she struggled to speak.

"Natalie, rest now. You shouldn't be talking."

But she continued. "He's so dead inside. There is nothing left there, but a shell and the hate."

"Yes, Nat, I know."

"I don't want to die, Nick, and don't tell me I'm not. Who's the doctor here, anyway?" She forced a smile.

Nick looked at her, pale pink tears in his eyes.

"Nick, could you?"

"Natalie, please don't ask this of me. How could I condemn you to this non-existence I have? I . . ." He almost choked over the words, "I love you too much to bequeath this to you."

Natalie sighed. "Nick, I am not Richard."

"I realize that, Nat. Do you know what you are asking?"

"Yes, I do and you know it. Nick, we can fight this thing together. I can handle it and you'll be here to help. I don't think eternity would be so bad if we're together."

Nick closed his eyes, as if in pain. "There is no turning back once begun."

"Will it hurt?"

"No, Nat, not like that. But will you hate me for what I do? Will I hate myself more than I already do?"

"Nick, please, I'm not afraid."

He turned away and when he looked back at her, his eyes glowed an odd shade. His fangs, always present, had grown, but still he said softly, "Forgive me, love." He glided his teeth as gently as possible into her carotid artery. Just before he felt the last spark of life dissipate, he pulled away and made a large wound in his own wrist. "Natalie, drink. You must." Her blood thirst was already coming alive as she complied with his verbal and mental urgings. She did as she was told. For hours the exchange went on, Nick in one part of his mind knowing that was taking a risk, but wanting her to be as strong as possible if vampire she had to become.

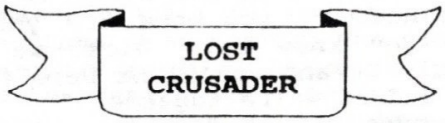
She opened her eyes to find herself lying alone in Nick's bedroom, the satin sheets feeling incredibly soft against her skin. She turned her head to see Nick standing across the room, his back to her. He sensed her return to consciousness and turned. His skin had an even paler shade than usual, as though he were drained himself. Then she remembered, as if in a dream, the hunger which she had fed. "Nick, was it real?"

He smiled and walked across the room to her bedside. "Feel for yourself." He placed her hand on the now healed skin on her throat. "Nat, listen to me. There are many ways to make a fledgling. With your brother, by necessity, it had to be rapid. I wanted to give you more than that. You have a blood-bond with me now, which binds us together, but which also makes you stronger than many are after a hundred years of this existence." He paused and sat down on the bed as though weary. "Of course, it is a bit draining from this side."

She sat up and reached for him, "Nick, will things be different?"

"Different? Yes, in a way, but, Natalie, are you sorry?"

"No, Nick. I don't think so. After all, there was no other way."



(with guitar chords)

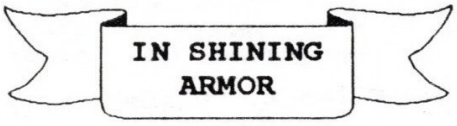
Words & music: E. M. McMicking

```
     D              G             A              D
Your life has been darkness and bloodlust and death,
        Bm           A             D
Yet you long for the kiss of the sun!
D               G               A             Bm
Dear friend, I promise, while still I have breath
      G                         A
I'll continue the work I've begun ---
        G                           A
Till we stand, hand in hand, in the sun!
```

You are not evil; I know in my heart.
Forget what they tell you. They lie.
I've seen your goodness; I've known from the start,
By the light in the depths of your eyes.
Do not dwell on the past you despise.

So come, lost crusader, come walk by my side.
I vow that all will be made right.
I will stand by you, whatever betide,
Through your lonely dark, sprinkled with light,
For you are my Forever Knight.

Reprinted from IN THE DARK, VOL. 1, NUMBER 1 -- the Newsletter of
THE FIRST FOREVER KNIGHT FAN CLUB OF CANADA



Although I know that I have tried
It's clear, despite the tears I've cried
The way he looked the night we met,
Is something I will not forget.

They wheeled him in, "A mess," they said.
This person definitely, dead.
But doubtless, he had been quite brave;
He'd died trying, to others, save.

And so, I never checked until
I turned around and got a chill;
My sanity I did suspect
For this *dead body* stood erect.

My scientific mind went blank.
I should have been afraid and shrank
From this amazing sight, but nope;
My curiosity could cope.

He tried his best to make me think
That I should fear my blood, he'd drink;
But something in my heart or will
Told me he'd sooner die, than kill.

And so it was that this began
A friendship with this man, not man;
Who's now become so much a part,
He dominates my mind and heart.

He goes by *Nick*; so apropos.
Because as I have come to know,
Out of the darkness into light,
He truly is my shining Knight.

by *Kathleen Y. Bergeron*

A LADY'S PLEDGE

by

Ellen M. "Blade" McMicking

Doctor Natalie Lambert carefully pulled the big '62 Cadillac to a stop, as close as she dared to the door of Detective Nicholas Knight's warehouse apartment. She got out quickly, glancing high eastward, shading her eyes from the sun. Swiftly, she keyed Nick's access code into the touchpad, and called out, "All clear!" as the door opened.

The Caddy's trunk-lid flew up, and a leather-coated blur shot into the safe haven, smoldering.

Natalie peered worriedly in after him. Then she smiled, breathed a sigh of relief, and went to shut the trunk.

By the time Natalie joined him in the apartment, Nick had shed his coat, and was pouring himself something to eat. She went to the fridge.

"Very good!" she exclaimed. "You've finally done some shopping!"

"Can't have my doctor starving to death on a housecall."

"I was hoping you were planning to eat some of it."

Nick made a grimace of disgust. "Maybe later. Not right after sunbathing."

Natalie looked sharply at him. "Are you all right? Any residual pain?"

"No, no! I've certainly survived far worse."

She studied his face, over which a smile dawned for her. She smiled wryly back, just as the microwave sounded behind her. Natalie retrieved her TV dinner, and joined Nick on the couch.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I tried to get you out of giving that live statement on the morning news, on medical grounds, but I was overruled. Every woman and most of the men in this city needed to know that that guy had finally been caught, and you were the cop they needed to hear it from, first hand."

Nick glanced into his goblet and muttered, "No rest for the wicked." He turned a lop-sided smile toward Natalie. "And when the Chief of Police 'asks' you to do overtime, what choice do you have?"

"Hmmm," Natalie agreed, her mouth occupied with her long-delayed meal. She swallowed. "I know just what you this needs," she stated firmly, as she put down her plate and hopped up. After rummaging in a bag she had left by the door, she headed triumphantly to the kitchen area with a bottle.

"I picked this up late yesterday," Natalie explained. "It's supposed to be for a cousin who's getting married this weekend, but I can get her another. We should celebrate the end of this case!" The petite coroner fumbled the lead foil off the bottle's top while poking in what should have been a cutlery drawer.

"Do you have a corkscrew, Nick?" she asked, as he gently plucked the bottle from her grasp and pulled the cork deftly with his teeth.

"Multiple use tools," he deadpanned, as he presented her the bottle.

She looked sidelong at him. "A regular walking Swiss Army Knife! Now, how much for you?" she asked, holding two wineglasses aloft.

"None, thank you."

"You're sure? It's red," she teased, displaying the colour as she filled one glass.

"No." More firmly this time. "Thank you."

"Oh, come on, Nick!" Natalie thumped the bottle down in mild frustration. "Janette drinks it! You're doing so well, a little won't hurt, I know it!"

Nick smiled at her through half-closed eyes. "Doctor, is that a prescription, or are you trying to ply me with alcohol?"

Nat grinned, and thrust the goblet toward him. "Okay, just a sniff."

He gently caught and pinned her wrist, and wrapped the other arm around her, as Natalie tried to manoeuvre the wine under Nick's nose. They were both laughing like school kids. Suddenly, their eyes met, and both sobered. Their playful embrace had suddenly become something altogether different. Natalie glanced down for a second, then returned her eyes to Nick's. She was surprised to hear herself murmur, "Dear God, but you get my blood up when you look at me like that!"

"I know. I can hear it. I can smell it." The eyes were turning gold, the fangs were beginning to show.

Natalie boldly reached up, gently touching his lip over one fang. "I'm not afraid of you. I know you'd never hurt me."

Nick abruptly released his hold on her and half-turned away. Natalie had to strain to hear him say, "I wouldn't, Nat. But, what I am would, between one heartbeat and the next." He stood silent for a few moments, then glanced at her, in full control of himself again. He looked away and continued softly, "Do you think, in all my centuries, I haven't tried to restrain myself? It's part of the curse on those like me, to be forced to destroy what we would love. We reach a point of... arousal at which we **must** feed. I've tried, I've tried..." Nick's eyes met Natalie's again, filled with old pain, and the need for his trusted friend to understand.

Natalie laid a hand lightly on Nick's arm and smiled her acceptance. "There's no need to push things. People have cared deeply for each other from a distance before. But mark my words, Nick Knight, I'll see us standing together in the sunlight before I'm through!"

Her self-assurance brought a tentative smile from Nick. "I hope you're right," he breathed.

"I am!" Natalie thought a moment. "Nick?"

Nick gave her his full attention. She looked down and began softly, "I was raised to believe that part of being a lady was never to knowingly get a man all worked up and then leave him like that." She glanced up, "Never to be a tease, you know?" Nick nodded. Natalie met and held his eyes as she continued, "I promise to always be a lady to

you, Nick." *My Knight's lady,* she added silently, *and if age catches up with me before I've found your cure, maybe I'll just start something neither of us can stop. Then I'll have eternity to find a cure for us both. I won't leave you alone,* she vowed in her heart, *even if, in the end, I have to get Janette to bring me across!*

"Thanks, Nat," Nick sighed.

They embraced again, in the quiet companionship and comfort of best friends. When they returned to the business of dinner, it was with a deeper trust of each other. Another link had been forged in a chain that might well bind them for eternity. But she still couldn't get him to try the wine.

This story was inspired by a few things about 'vampire sex' that Geraint Wyn Davies said at the TORONTO STAR TREK CONVENTION, in Toronto, Ontario in July of 1993.

Reprinted from IN THE DARK, VOL. 1, NUMBER 1 -- the Newsletter of
THE FIRST FOREVER KNIGHT FAN CLUB OF CANADA

HOPE

When she is near, I find I feel
As I did, long ago
A heated rush of tenderness
That lucky men can know.

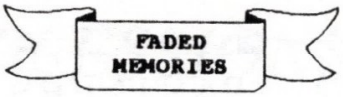
But through eight hundred years and more,
Through incarnations, wide,
I have kept myself apart,
And all love I have denied.

Yet my feelings for this one
Are so hard to comprehend
For we were first, and still remain,
The very best of friends.

Much more than that, this woman wakes
Emotions I'd forgot
She makes me, more than ever, want
To be something I'm not.

She is much more than friend to me.
Her caring helps me cope.
She is present; she is future;
Most of all, she is my hope.

by *Kathleen Y. Bergeron*



Up in the attic
Down on my knees
Going through a trunk full of memories.

Most bring me pleasure
Some make me sad
It's all a part of the Life that I've had.

Memories preserved
Lovers and friends
Lost in a haze of other lives, there, and then.

Traces of perfume
Scent fragile lace
A gift from a lady, saved in a case.

A rough wooden cross
Rests in a box
A token of Joan, who heard Dieus Vox.

Yellowing tissue
Roses pressed in a book
A cherished antique doll is worth a look.

Photos of loved ones
Fading with age
Shadow mementos arranged on a page.

The past and the future
Equally mesh
Reminiscing helps in reducing stress.

Ashes to ashes
And dust to dust
I close the trunk and leave because I must.

Descending the stairs
Breathing fresh air
Dust in my nose and cobwebs in my hair.

All that I hope to be
All that I am
Are sheltered in those dusty, faded memories.

by *Pam Jensen*

PARTNERS

He comes on at the very start
As something of a boor.
He's arrogant, self righteous and,
Of he, himself, to sure.

At least, that's how he seemed to me
And I let out a moan,
The night the Captain paired us up;
I'd rather work alone.

But there's a human saying which
Describes our current act.
I think it says something about
How "opposites attract".

And so one once called Jean-Pierre
And one named Schanke, Don
Have somehow found a way to work
Despite the pros and cons.

There are so many questions that,
I hope he does not ask
Those things I cannot answer
Which I hide within a mask.

For now, it seems, it is enough
And Schanke is adept,
At leaving me my privacy
And learning to accept.

It is an odder partnership
Than I can comprehend,
But still, along the way somehow
I've learned to call him "friend".

by *Kathleen Y. Bergeron*

OBSESSIONS

by

Denysé M. Bridger

AUGUST 4th, 1990: VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA ---

The vampire's fangs sank deep into his lover's neck, tasting the familiar bittersweet tang of her blood. She arched against the stab of pain, then pressed herself back onto the equally sharp assault of his possession. Laughter bubbled forth from her parted lips as she urged him onward in frenzied lust. Her hands moved between her thighs to quickly match the rhythm of his hips driving into her with the brutal force she begged him for. Minutes later, his head drew back and she fell forward, no longer held against him. She twisted instantly, and her mouth closed over his exposed wrist. A hiss of surprise escaped him, but he allowed her to drink while she continued to writhe beneath the ministrations of her fingers. It was over seconds later, and she lay gasping on the bed. She felt him get up, and within minutes the sound of running water told her where he'd gone.

Gabrielle Sinclaire searched the crowded nightclub for the tall, imposing man she needed to see. LaCroix was not among the guests who mingled in every available space within the noisy, strobe-lit room. Her heart felt like it was breaking, but she smiled past the pain when the attractive young owner approached her. Not surprisingly, the blond man didn't look pleased to see her. Eric had made the mistake of confronting her the first time LaCroix had brought her into the *Crypt*, and had suffered a severe punishment for his folly. Ten months later, he still blamed Gabrielle for LaCroix's lost interest in him.

"He's not here," Eric informed her with obvious pleasure. "He left with a rather striking blonde creature."

"Not unlike you, Eric?" she answered with a sweetness that brought an instantaneous scowl to his handsome features. "Why do you assume it is LaCroix I am seeking? Perhaps I simply came to see you."

"Now, that might very well be interesting," he replied, his eyes alive with humour but also a hint of curiosity. "If I believed you, of course."

"I've no reason to lie to you, have I?" she countered.

"Let me get you a drink," Eric suggested, slipping his arm around

her shoulders as he led her to the bar. "And we'll discuss it."

"How long has it been since you last saw him?"

Gabrielle gazed down into the ruby liquid that swirled in the wine-glass she held. The reminder of his absence was like a twisting knife buried in her chest. A film of red haze distorted her vision, then she swallowed the grief that was torturing her. She drained the glass and set it aside.

"That long?" Eric surmised. "I didn't know, Gabrielle."

It was the first time he'd actually used her name, and she turned to stare at him, waiting for laughter that never came. There was a sad knowledge in his dark blue eyes, the pain a tiny remnant of his own sense of loss. She touched his hand, let her small limb cover his on the tabletop between them. Eric turned his hand palm upward and his fingers laced with hers as he met her gaze.

"I'm sorry, Eric."

"So am I. Sorry for the pair of us." There was grim, dark humour to his words, and he looked at the shadowy club as if he were staring into an empty room. "I expect he'll be back soon. Fucking Vixen doesn't usually take long."

Gabrielle winced at the words, felt her stomach lurch violently, and barely managed not to flee at the confirmation of her fears.

"Learn to hate him, Gabby," Eric whispered softly, and tightened his hold on her slender hand. "It hurts a lot less."

"I wish I could." Her voice was shaky in spite of her desire not to break in front of this young man. *Gabby!* How long had it been since she'd been called that? Jared Langdon had been the only one, other than her beloved grandmother, who had ever used this casual form of her name. She tended to dislike it, yet it seemed as natural from Eric as it had from the other two people she'd loved.

"Do you want me to tell him you were here?"

She shook her head. "He'll know anyway. He always knows when I need him."

"He just doesn't let it get in his way," Eric concluded with a tilt of his head. "Why don't you stay for a few hours?"

"I can't stand the noise, Eric," she admitted. "It overwhelms me, even after all this time."

"Come on," he decided. He kept her hand firmly in his as he stood up and he led her into the back room, and closed the door behind them.

Gabrielle let out a soft sigh of relief, and let go of his hand to wander over to the leather couch that dominated this part of the three-room apartment. She remembered the last time she'd been in this place, and her heart thudded erratically in her chest. The recalled sensation of LaCroix's body joined with hers was like a tangible presence in the room. She reached out, tuning her mental probe to the other images that lingered in the air. She found nothing, only the strong sense of loneliness that hovered over the atmosphere. She turned to Eric, and saw him watching her closely, as if he knew what she had been doing. Of course, he did, she reminded herself. Part of the uniqueness of being a vampire came from the enhanced mental awareness it gave them.

"He has not taken anyone in this room since . . . " When she faltered on the question, Eric laughed.

"Not since he brought you here."

It almost begged for a "why?", but she didn't ask.

Eric again took her under his arm and led her into the dark bedroom that adjoined the sitting room. She glanced at the round bed. Her grin was echoed in his eyes. He pointed to the back wall of the room and she saw the massive fireplace that took up over half the space. He went to the hearth and quickly had a blazing fire roaring, the leaping tongues of flame cast showers of sparkling light onto the stone base.

"He treats you differently than he does the rest of us, you know."

Gabrielle curled into a seat in front of the flames, her knees drawn up against her chest. For several moments she didn't answer Eric's observation, then she smiled, the expression wistful.

"To understand that you must know what I am, and what use it can be to LaCroix," she eventually said. "When I was mortal, I was psychic. Since he made me, the talent has grown. I am also the reincarnation of an old love. So, perhaps, I was always doomed to his possession. He owned me once before and assures me it was a most pleasant experience. He also lost another love. This one is as we are and LaCroix does not lose anything easily."

Eric snorted his agreement. "Too bad he doesn't have the same aversion to discarding those he seduces."

Gabrielle nodded. "He wants me to find this child he's lost."

"And have you seen LaCroix's prize?"

"Yes," she admitted. "But with it comes the vision of his destruction. I am afraid to lose him so completely, Eric. Whatever else he is, he is the man I love." She let the words stop abruptly, and her head snapped up.

Eric was already staring at the figure framed in the doorway, his young face a study in conflicting emotions. He was pleased to see LaCroix, the response something he truly lacked control over, yet, this time, there was also an unmistakable thread of anger in his silent greeting. LaCroix's eyebrow rose, but he made no comment on the startling realization.

"Isn't this cosy?" LaCroix drawled as he strolled into the room and sat on the bed. "I'm surprised to see you here, Gabrielle."

"Why? Because I am supposed to be home, awaiting my master's return?" she snapped with a bitterness that actually surprised her.

"Leave us, Eric," LaCroix ordered. His eyes never strayed from the rigid profile of the lady who dared to speak so carelessly to him. She had always been this way, he recalled. Despite a very genuine, and reasonable, fear of his moods, she had never hesitated to speak her mind to him. If she was angry, he seldom had to wonder why. And, she was most definitely angry now.

Eric sighed, knew it would be futile to disagree, and he patted Gabrielle's arm in shared support and understanding. She smiled her gratitude to him, and waited.

LaCroix watched her in silence for several moments, then he rose and went to her. He folded his long body into a comfortable seat at her side and let his hand slip beneath the heavy, loose waves of her hair. The soft auburn tresses felt like silk against his skin. He smiled. She was dramatically different from the woman he'd been with less than an hour past.

"Where is your newest conquest?" Gabrielle asked quietly, determined not to reveal what the casualness cost her heart.

"Why, do you wish to meet her?" LaCroix enquired, his voice cool with amusement. "Perhaps you could befriend them all, the way you have

young Eric."

Gabrielle jerked away from him, his words scalded her with their lack of feeling. She would have risen and left him, but he moved with the speed of a striking cobra. She was pinned to the fire-warmed carpet before she could orient herself to the shift. LaCroix's dazzling indigo eyes drew her inward, and she was filled with the familiar sense of drowning in his presence.

"She's not you, my pet," he assured her. "None of them are."

"And I'm supposed to be flattered by this revelation?" she retorted. Her concentration was divided as she tried to hold onto her rage, and deny the desire to beg him for the touch she craved.

LaCroix's tongue brushed over her trembling lips, then dipped between them as they parted involuntarily, the response a wordless invitation beyond her control. Instead of the savagery of the embrace he'd been locked in such a short time ago, there was only tender seduction in his manner now. His caresses were provocative and loving. Gabrielle's tears wet his cheek when he nipped at the soft lobe of her ear, and he turned to catch the droplets of blood on his tongue, savouring their taste.

"Why tears, Gabrielle?"

"Don't, LaCroix," she whispered halfheartedly. "Don't mock me for feeling the way I do."

"And how is that, pet?" he murmured, his fingers worked the buttons on the soft cotton shirt she wore. He flipped the material aside and gazed down at the flawless expanse of luscious curves. The fire flushed her skin the warm colour of rich cream, and he lowered his head to the hard bud of one nipple. The quiver of response that shuddered through her was accompanied by another weak attempt to push him away.

"Not like this," she gasped with a sense of near pain at the denial. "I don't want you like this."

"I think you do," he disagreed. His tongue flicked at her other breast, teasing the hypersensitive tip before he covered it completely and began sucking with exquisite gentleness.

"No!" Despite the shaking that assailed her entire body, and the pulses of warmth that demanded his touch, she did pull away from him this time. She crawled out of his reach and glared at him as she hugged the shirt to her. "How can you do this to me?"

"We've been through this a hundred times, Gabrielle," he said sharply.

"You made her one of us," Gabrielle accused. "I know that means she no longer serves to feed -- "

"Gabrielle," LaCroix interrupted her, his voice low and dangerous. "I do not answer to you, my pet. If you want me here, I'll stay. If not, go."

It really was that simple to him. None of the myriad of painful emotions that plagued her were of any importance to LaCroix. She lived for him, just as she'd died to be with him, and it meant nothing. She knew he'd fed, she could feel the warmth of stolen blood in his body. She'd barely satisfied her own hunger, so anxious had she been to find him. She'd long ago lost any dignity when it came to seeking him out. More than once recently he'd walked away from her, laughing at the anguish such retreats caused her.

"Why did you want me, LaCroix?"

He ignored her and rose. Moments later she was alone in the room.

Almost a week had passed before LaCroix stepped into the huge Sheraton mansion again. Gabrielle had withdrawn totally from their elite society. Eric had finally cornered the ancient vampire and suggested, with more force than LaCroix would have believed him capable of exhibiting, that she badly needed to see him. The young man had received no response to his attempted visits over the past few nights.

To his considerable surprise, LaCroix found the house was deserted. The old rooms echoed with emptiness, and a feeling of being abandoned. It had not felt this way the last time he'd been here. Still, it was good to be in the quiet, peaceful atmosphere again. He decided to stay. Sooner or later, Gabrielle would return. She always did.

Vixen watched the house from across the street, curiosity kept her firmly in place, despite the hours that had passed since LaCroix's disappearance. She hadn't had to indulge in guesses about where he would have gone. She knew who lived in this house and she wanted to see the woman everybody spoke of in such reverent tones.

She began to think she'd wasted her night entirely when she spotted the woman she'd been waiting for. Gabrielle Sinclaire was not at all what Vixen had expected. She was elegantly and richly dressed, was of medium height, and had a rich, full mane of flowing red hair. The loneliness that surrounded her was almost visible to the other vampire. That was her weakness, Vixen decided. She clung too tightly to their master and that was why he'd left her.

Vixen's expression was smug, and the hint of insecurity that had drawn her to the Sheraton house quickly faded. Gabrielle opened the door to the old place and Vixen's satisfaction vanished when LaCroix stood framed in the doorway. The streetlight cast its stark white glow over the couple as they stared at each other. Not a word was exchanged, then LaCroix swept her into his arms and carried her inside.

Jealousy churned in Vixen, and uncoiled like a venomous snake. She concentrated her limited mental ability to pick up some sense of what was going on inside the house. Minutes later, rage flooded through her like a poison when she heard LaCroix's laughter in her mind. He controlled the link and maintained it just long enough to let her feel his response to Gabrielle's passion, then he snapped the bond like he would brittle bones.

It would be almost a month before Vixen shared his bed again, and each day without him nurtured her hatred for the woman who held him once more. She would never truly know why LaCroix sought her then. Her arrogance assumed it was desire.

SEPTEMBER 29th, 1990: VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA ---

It was insanity, this hunger that refused to go away. Gabrielle moaned low in her throat and rolled onto her back, her vampiric senses too acutely attuned to the sounds and scents of the city that surrounded

her. She wanted to block the reminders of life, to deny there was anything outside this vortex of suffering in which she'd locked herself. She wanted to scream, over and over, until he heard her. Paradoxically, it required nothing more than the hint of his presence in her life to make her reject the desire to call out her anguish. She stared into the blackness above her, her vision as keen in darkness as it had once been in light. She knew the patterns of dirt that crisscrossed the ceiling, as well as every crack in the peeling paint. Gabrielle had crawled into this prison days ago, determined to never leave it again. That resolution had been part of the reason she'd chosen the lowest level of the ancient building as her retreat.

Had he even noticed she was no longer in the house they had shared since her waking? She'd thought it was over, the pain and the constant struggling to please him. He'd come back to her, and promised her he wouldn't leave her again. But he had, of course. Because she couldn't tell him where Nicholas was, only that he had changed his name again. Bitter laughter welled inside her and spewed forth, the sound hysterical, tainted with madness. Why would he take note of her absence, when he had so many others to fulfill his needs and desires? The rumbling in her stomach had grown into a genuine source of pain during the past couple of days. She curled into a ball of agony as another, stronger wave of hunger shook her to the core of her being.

They were supposed to leave Victoria. Almost a full year had passed since the night he'd told Jared they were leaving the city. Langdon had never resurfaced in her life after that, although she'd followed his handling of the Sheraton Corporation, and had silently approved of the direction he took with her family's business. He hated LaCroix, and probably her, too. He had good reason for both sentiments.

"I hate you, too, LaCroix," she whispered to the empty room. It seemed to laugh back at her, as if the very atmosphere knew the truth, and recognised the lie for what it was -- loneliness.

"How long has she been gone?"

"How the hell should I know?"

LaCroix's restraint was getting tenuous as he faced the tall, blonde woman who'd been at his side again in recent weeks. Mary Alyce she had been in her short lifetime, and LaCroix's lover for the much shorter span of her immortal life. He'd kept her separated from the red-haired beauty who had been his constant companion for the past year. Yet, in spite of his determination, Gabrielle seemed to know exactly when she was no longer the only one who shared his blood and his bed. It shouldn't have mattered, but it did. Very much. To Gabrielle.

Did it matter this much? he wondered, his mind still refusing to believe what some inner instinct knew to be true.

"Contact Eric," LaCroix directed. "He seems to have grown quite fond of Gabrielle in recent months." Almost too fond of her, he added mentally. The young blond had become bolder in his confrontations with LaCroix, always about the same thing -- LaCroix's treatment of Gabrielle. The master vampire knew the younger man had fallen in love with her. He also knew Gabrielle would be oblivious to that knowledge. She saw only one man in her world. Didn't she?

"They probably cry over you together," Vixen laughed, interrupting his thoughts. "He won't tell me if he has seen her." "I suggest you

find out," he said coldly, dismissing the hint of doubt that had crept into his mood, and returning to the source of his present annoyance. "I want her found -- tonight."

"Why?"

LaCroix's patience, strained at best when dealing with this one, suddenly snapped and he grabbed the girl's arm in a grip that would have broken the limb had she been human. His face bent to hers and his voice dropped to a hiss of warning.

"My reasons don't concern you."

Vixen jerked away from him and strutted across the room. The Sheraton mansion spooked her. It was old and stately, sumptuous with a lifestyle she'd rebelled against her entire life. She picked up an antique book and flipped it open with a carelessness that spoke eloquently of her ignorance of its value. She dropped the priceless tome on the desk and continued her survey of the library. LaCroix had never allowed her to step foot in this house before tonight. She knew he only did so now because Gabrielle was not present. Somehow he'd felt her leave this place and not return. It was what had drawn him back here.

What kind of bond was between them that would allow them such intimate knowledge of each other? She knew the other woman sensed LaCroix's activities as acutely as he did Gabrielle's. Vixen wanted the same connection to her master. LaCroix laughed each time she asked.

Vixen hated the other woman. She'd seen Gabrielle and LaCroix together often. Each time her resentment of the delicate, auburn haired vampiress grew stronger. She had frequently plotted Gabrielle's demise in the past few months. It was only her fear of LaCroix's wrath that thwarted her plans.

"What does she do for you that makes her so special?" Vixen demanded. When LaCroix's scowl deepened, she sauntered back to him and leered as her eyes swept over his tall, leather-clad body. "I'm sure if you give me a chance, I can do it better."

Instead of piquing his interest, she managed only to aggravate him further. LaCroix's snort of disdain was punctuated by his turning his back to her and walking to the window.

"You know what I want, Vixen. See that she's found."

"You really think it's that simple, don't you?" Vixen snarled. "Fuck me until the princess goes missing, then pull out all the stops to get your precious pet back for you. Find her yourself. I'm sure she'll be thrilled to have you up her ass again. Or does the angel prefer -- " Vixen's throat closed in sudden terror as LaCroix's glare locked with hers and the full force of his rage seared her mind. She was rooted to the spot, frozen with panic as he crossed the small space that separated them. An invisible hand tightened around her neck, and she shook like a leaf in a windstorm when LaCroix's fingers smoothed over her throat.

"You're very anxious to die, aren't you?" he murmured, the words oddly, terrifyingly gentle.

His fingers closed around the slender neck and he watched her eyes widen with greater fright. He enjoyed the plea he read in her shock-dazed expression.

"Leave this house, Vixen," he whispered. "And if you wish to go on living, stay as far away from me as you possibly can."

LaCroix released her with an exaggerated smile, and she staggered back as if he'd struck her. One pale hand moved to her throat to check for damage she knew hadn't been inflicted. "I'll find her -- "

"You will stay away from me, and my 'angel'," he told her, using the name with a warmth that infuriated the woman in front of him. "If I find you have so much as spoken to her, I will finish this, Vixen."

Her temper reared and demanded release. For the first time in her short life, Vixen subdued the anger and swallowed the vile mixture of humiliation and fear she felt when LaCroix's eyes swept over her. There was no longer even a trace of enjoyment in his gaze, only a contempt that cut through her like a knife. Furious, she spun on her heel and left the mansion without a backward glance.

Vixen had plans that could no longer wait.

LaCroix paced the unnatural stillness of the house, his senses attuned to any tiny sound or sense of passing that would tell him how long she'd been gone. How had she slipped away without his knowledge? He dismissed the question from his mind, it was becoming redundant anyway. For a moment, in the safety of his solitude, he did open himself to the real source of his anger -- he experienced a loneliness that he hadn't known since he'd lost Nicholas. And he abhorred it.

He stopped his directionless trek in the living room at the window. She had looked at this garden almost a year ago, and had told him she was not his Gabrielle from two centuries past. He'd told her she was wrong, and hours later he'd claimed her life as his. She'd accepted him, and the price of his love, without fear -- as though she'd always known what love would cost her when she found it.

Love. His smile was ironic. She loved him, and he used her. It had been this way forever. LaCroix was master to all his children, and favoured few. He'd bound Gabrielle to him again, and only now remembered why he chose to do so. She touched some inner part of him that he'd denied for a thousand years. She had an intuition about his needs that made her as dangerous to him as he was to humanity. Like all obsessions, their desires became part of the same madness, shared and understood, each feeding the other.

He'd left her nearly a month ago. She'd gotten too close to him and had become too essential to him -- again. He needed to put distance between them that would free him from the sense of attachment he now felt toward her. He'd all but forgotten how Gabrielle reacted to being rejected. It went beyond anger, it always had. She'd destroy herself rather than face him with her sense of betrayal. She'd pretended for a long time that she didn't know how he took many of his victims. They'd fought about it long and often. Until he'd heard enough. After that it was never spoken of again.

"I hate you, too, LaCroix . . ."

The whisper jolted him from his mental wanderings, and he reached out to the faint sound of her thoughts. He felt dementia shudder through him, and intense hunger. It flooded his mind and brought with it a wave of agony that made him clutch the window frame for support. She was starving to death, quite literally. And, he knew, she was doing it deliberately.

The feelings dissipated as the mental link faded into silent darkness. There was no further sense of her and he wondered how far away she would be. It didn't matter, of course. He had to find her before she was successful in her attempted suicide. He left the house as silently as he had first entered it.

Hours later, LaCroix was forced into hiding by the rising sun. He was closer to finding her than he'd been the previous night. Just as the first rays of dawn tinted the sky a soft, blushing pink, he'd found a young boy who had seen her. The kid had promised to meet LaCroix that evening and bring the vampire to the building she'd disappeared into. LaCroix didn't doubt that the boy would turn up at the appointed time, the price he'd offered was all the enticement necessary to insure Jamie's return.

LaCroix found her huddled in a dark corner of the basement room, curled in on herself like a terrified child. The assessment wasn't far wrong, he realised, when her head lifted and she turned toward the tiny sounds his approach made. There was a fierceness in her features that told him it had been far too long since she'd fed.

"Gabrielle?"

A hiss of fury greeted his query and he smiled as he closed the small space that separated them. He reached out a hand to caress the tangled mane of auburn hair and retracted the touch instantly when she turned with a snarl that might very well present some danger to him. His smile grew more pronounced despite the apparent rage she felt toward him.

"Come, pet," he murmured gently. "I'm here to help you."

For eternal moments she stared at him, the conflict written clearly on her expressive features. She wanted to cling to him, with equal passion she wanted to reject him.

"Get away from me, bastard!" she snapped, then curled inward again as her body was ravaged by a spasm of pain that threatened to have her screaming in agony.

"Gabrielle."

LaCroix's voice was compelling in its steady softness, and he waited for her to respond to the demand. When she refused to turn, he reached out and grabbed a handful of heavy hair to force her to meet his gaze.

"When was the last time you fed?"

"Leave me alone!" She tried to push him away, but his grip was relentless -- as relentless as the anger that rose in his blue eyes and whispered a warning to her fevered brain.

"You foolish child!" This time it was LaCroix's voice that dropped to an impatient hiss of rage. He pulled her to her feet, and had to hold her as another tremor of anguish shook her small frame. "I have no time for your fits of temper, Gabrielle. Answer me!"

"I said **leave -- me -- alone!**" She punctuated each word with a blow to his chest, desperate to escape him. Escape his touch, and the twisted yearning that consumed her when she stared up into the beauty of his face.

"I heard what you said," he whispered. "And until you explain what this is about, I don't intend to go anywhere, my pet."

"Go back to your bitch and leave me," Gabrielle shouted. This time when she yanked away from him, he allowed her to escape his grasp. His laughter seconds later lit a fire within her that was frightening in its intensity. She bared her fangs and leapt for him, bearing him down to

the floor with the suddenness of her attack. "I hate you, LaCroix! Do you hear me, I despise you?"

LaCroix's amusement was extinguished quickly when her face transformed and he sensed the true depth of her fury and her hunger. It had to have been at least a week, possibly longer, since she'd fed, and the hunger had pushed her to the edge of sanity. The turmoil that drove her was too deeply ingrained, too convoluted for him to grasp in the moments that held them locked together, blue eyes holding grey with enraged composure. As rapidly as it had risen within her, the strength of her anger deserted her and left her gasping as she slid off him and huddled again in a tight ball next to him. LaCroix watched her as she closed her eyes and rocked herself, murmuring nonsensical words that were little more than whimpers of sound.

She was oblivious to him as he rose and left her. He searched the hallway for the boy who'd been with him when he'd entered the abandoned apartment. There was no sign of the child, and LaCroix's irritation flared anew. He'd wanted the kid close by for convenience sake, fully anticipating the condition in which he'd find Gabrielle. Now, he'd have to track the boy down and make sure he didn't repeat what he'd undoubtedly witnessed between the two vampires.

Despite LaCroix's intention, Jamie did escape him. The ancient vampire's search was interrupted by the unmistakable threat of imminent danger. The boy was forgotten, and LaCroix flew back to the crumbling ruin of a building before the threat could become more than an unseen peril.

Less than an hour had passed before LaCroix returned. In his absence, Gabrielle had been found by another. This was the menace that had called him back. The young woman stood over the weakened redhead, black leather jacket gleaming in the white streetlight that streamed through the solitary window. She was almost as tall as LaCroix, and her shoulder-length hair almost as fair. Dark eyes glowed with malicious enjoyment of Gabrielle's state, and the scarlet mouth was curved upward in a parody of smile. He hesitated to go into the room and, instead, slipped back into the shadows to observe. He hadn't thought her quite this foolhardy.

"You really are pathetic," Vixen sneered, her booted foot nudging Gabrielle. She received no response and drew her foot back to land a solid kick to the other woman's stomach. "No wonder he grew tired of you and chose another. He chose me. I don't run, Gabrielle, not from anything!"

LaCroix felt a dark sort of humour rise within him as he began to know beyond doubt what had happened. Somehow, without his knowledge, Gabrielle had finally been confronted with Vixen's existence, and she'd run from him rather than face him. He didn't have to wonder what sort of pleasure the blonde had taken in telling Gabrielle of their relationship. Vixen had made it very clear how she felt about the lovely redhead. Still, he had no intention of allowing the young punk to force Gabrielle's destruction. He would have stepped into the room but his lady surprised him.

As swiftly as she'd jumped LaCroix a short while earlier, Gabrielle moved again and slammed a startled Vixen into the solid cement wall. The younger vampire stared in undisguised shock, then her expression

slipped into a dangerous leer.

"So, the angel has a temper," she taunted. "But you're weak, bitch. You haven't got what it takes to be with him."

"Have a care for your existence," Gabrielle snarled, her voice rough with malice and hunger. The words were old, had been among the first that LaCroix had said to her when she'd awakened to her new life. "I can easily see it ended."

LaCroix smiled. She was more right than either of them realised at that moment.

"An existence will end here tonight," Vixen agreed. She pulled a wooden stake from under her jacket and advanced.

Gabrielle saw the threat, knew it would be so very easy to allow the other woman to do what she herself had intended all along. Only the glitter of triumph in Vixen's eyes made the decision the wrong answer.

"Quite possibly," LaCroix murmured quietly. He stepped into the room and waited for Vixen to lower the weapon she wielded. From the corner of his eye, he saw Gabrielle sway and grope for the wall as support.

"Gabrielle?"

She heard his voice from a tremendous distance, felt the warmth of it flood over her weary body, and she fell into the sudden, encompassing peace of blackness.

Vixen backed away, terror etched into her pale features, and the stake clattered noisily to the floor. She backed up against the wall that Gabrielle had thrown her into minutes earlier, and she waited. The thought of escape never occurred to her. She knew it would be futile to run.

LaCroix ignored the blonde woman and walked to Gabrielle's sprawled form. He bent to pick her up and cradled her against his chest as he turned his attention back to his other lover. In that moment, he wondered why he'd taken any interest at all in the girl.

"Bring someone to me at the mansion," LaCroix said softly, then turned to leave. "Choose carefully, Vixen," he cautioned with subtle meaning.

"Why is she so important to you, LaCroix?!" Despite her fear, the younger woman had to know. She'd watched the two vampires together often, saw the adoration Gabrielle felt for LaCroix. Vixen understood that part of the puzzle, she worshipped LaCroix like the God she'd never believed in. What truly bothered Vixen was the respect the ancient vampire displayed when dealing with the redhaired beauty. Jealousy was not an emotion Vixen had been familiar with during her short life, she found it even more distasteful in her new existence.

"Trust that she is important," LaCroix answered, blue eyes like ice as they swept over the other woman. "Choose to remember it in future and you may yet survive the night."

"I want an answer!"

LaCroix ignored the outburst and continued out of the decaying building. Gabrielle had not regained any form of consciousness, and the weakening of her will was a growing cause of genuine concern to him. He had to get her someplace safe, feed her, and try to find her sanity again. If not, his plans for Nicholas would be dealt a serious blow.

The dream refused to release her, and Gabrielle felt the horror

rise rapidly within her. Her stomach roiled at the scene she was witnessing, yet she was powerless to stop any of it. The fair haired man who stood before LaCroix was enraged, and she knew it had something to do with the broken body that lay on the floor at their feet. She knew him, didn't she? This handsome man with golden blond hair and pain-filled eyes. His name eluded her, his memory eluded her . . . Yet, she knew him. The words they spoke blurred, never quite clear enough for her to hear. She saw the change in the younger one's face . . .

Agony exploded through her entire body. A thick, crimson blanket poured over her to suffocate her in its strength. She screamed, the sound torn from a throat that no longer wanted to accommodate such sounds, and LaCroix's face contorted with disbelief as the flaming wood was brutally buried in his chest ... Nicholas!

"NO . . ."

Her shriek echoed in the huge house, and LaCroix felt his stomach cringe at the absolute terror that filled the sound. He waited as the nightmare released her and his arms went around Gabrielle as she bolted upright in the bed and immediately collapsed against him. She was shuddering violently, and the force of the images in her mind continued to rock her.

"Tell me what you saw, Gabrielle?" he murmured gently, pitching his tone to a soothing low.

"Nothing . . ." she eventually whispered, pulling away from him and falling back to the softness of the bed. She saw the play of annoyance that he couldn't completely conceal flickering over his features. The recognition, sometimes a source of small satisfaction to her, came as a relief now. He'd been furious to discover that she could block him from her mind, an instinctive remnant of defense from her mortal life. She knew what she had seen was not simply a dream and the understanding struck terror so deeply into her soul that she felt herself drowning in the horror again.

"It was not merely a dream, Gabrielle," he observed, the words an eerie echo to her thought. He allowed enough demand in the soft whisper to make her shake her head in natural response. That acknowledgement gave him an instant of sincere fear. Before he could pursue it further, her voice drew him to meet her imploring eyes.

"Why won't you leave me alone, LaCroix? I want to die."

"You belong to me, Gabrielle," he reminded her, though his tone had again become gentle.

"You have another now," she whispered, and for the first time, she allowed the tears that had been building to finally be shed. They'd been demanding release since the moment Vixen had laughed in her face, and described in explicit detail the intimacy of her nights with LaCroix. Gabrielle had known in some deep part of her mind that what she heard was the girl's passion, and not LaCroix's, but it hardly mattered. He inspired devotion in his children, he never reciprocated the commitment. On that count, Vixen was more blind to him than Gabrielle had ever been.

"Is that why you've been behaving like a senseless child?"

Gabrielle didn't answer him, she felt like her heart was breaking within her, and there was no strength left to reply to any of his words. The room spun erratically around her, faded in and out of focus. She

closed her eyes, tasted the salty warmth of her tears and the faint flavour of blood within them.

"Damn you!" It was a breath of sound, something she was not completely conscious of, yet her unmistakable sincerity echoed in the soft utterance.

LaCroix kept his irritation in check and he went to the door. Vixen was waiting, as she'd been ordered to, a small frightened girl held firmly in her grasp. LaCroix smiled at the teenager and she shook her head. He took her arm and led her into the room, feeling only slight resistance to his grip. She was barely five feet tall, slender to the point of skinniness, and she couldn't have been more than thirteen-years-old.

"What's your name, child?"

"Charity," she whispered, her tone one of terrified awe as she stared up at the handsome vampire.

"Appropriate," he murmured. "This is Gabrielle," he told the girl. "I want you to look after her for me, Charity. She's very ill."

The girl looked up at him in confusion and disbelief.

"You don't even know me, sir," Charity noted. "Why would you trust me with such a task? I could harm her."

"But you won't, will you?" LaCroix's amusement was genuine as he looked down into the wide-eyed innocence of her face. She was a plain child, but there was a radiance in her face that would have one day made her beautiful. Gabrielle would like the girl.

When he returned the following night, LaCroix's surprise was evident. He had expected to find the child dead, having fed Gabrielle's hunger. Instead, he found the girl seated at the foot of the bed, with Gabrielle's head resting in her lap. She stroked the older woman's hair and continued the soft song she'd been crooning. LaCroix sensed a peace in Gabrielle that had been missing for a very long time.

"LaCroix?" Gabrielle forced herself into a sitting position, and reached for Charity's hand as the tall, pale-haired vampire completed his walk to the bed.

For several moments LaCroix said nothing, his look wandered over the child now curled protectively in Gabrielle's embrace. His eyes narrowed dangerously when he understood what had happened in his absence.

"Go," Gabrielle whispered to the girl she held. She knew the mood he'd slipped into and didn't want the child to witness the punishment she felt was pending. Charity must have known why she was being sent away and shook her head.

"I won't leave you," she replied softly. "He told me to take care of you."

"There is an old room across the hall," Gabrielle smiled. "It was mine when I was your age. It is yours now. Please, Charity, I need to talk to LaCroix. He won't hurt me," she assured the girl. "You must believe that."

Charity was not convinced that the imposing man would not harm the elegant lady he'd told her to watch over. His eyes were cold and she could feel the threat of anger in him. Gabrielle's hand on her chin brought Charity's eyes back to meet the smoky grey of the older woman's gaze.

"I know it is hard for you to understand, little one," Gabrielle said quietly, her smile gentle. "I love LaCroix. He will not hurt me."

It was difficult to say which came as the greater surprise to LaCroix, Gabrielle's admission of love. (Until she said the words, he had not realised he did, in fact, miss them -- she had not spoken to him of love for a very long time.) Or, was it her assertions of her safety? LaCroix felt some of the darkness in his mood dissipate, and he sat on the edge of the bed.

"I promise you I will not injure your mistress, little one," he told the girl, adopting the name Gabrielle had bestowed upon the child.

Charity nodded, offering him a tentative smile, then she slipped from the room moments later. LaCroix turned his speculative gaze toward Gabrielle.

"You chose to bring her across." It wasn't a question, simply a flat statement of irrefutable fact.

"She is a very special girl," Gabrielle said. "I liked her. She offered me her life, LaCroix, when she understood that was why you had left her with me."

"Her spirit is generous," LaCroix conceded with a smile. "Like yours, my pet. Your declaration of love warms my heart."

"Assuming you have one," she smiled, but the expression lacked any sincere warmth. "Why would it surprise you to hear me admit such a thing?" Gabrielle demanded, anger rose again within her, as it had the previous night. This time, though still weak, she had some form of control over her emotional state, and she refused to unleash the rage she felt. "You have always been more than willing to use my weakness to your advantage."

"You have never minded, Gabrielle," he said with his characteristic arrogance.

"Some things I mind very much, my love." For several moments there was a heavy silence between them, then she sighed and met the hypnotic blue of his eyes. "Why?" she asked, finally daring to venture into the darkness that had possessed her for the past weeks.

"Vixen is nothing, Gabrielle," he replied, understanding instantly the direction of her thoughts. "I have taken many like her over the centuries. I have bound few as I have you."

"What makes me so special?" She wondered, only partially able to keep the sarcasm from her tone. There was still enough genuine entreaty in the question to make him smile, and she didn't resist when he pulled her toward him. With a sigh that made her detest herself for her weakness, Gabrielle settled into his arms and clung to him.

"You are special, my pet." LaCroix tilted her face up so their eyes met, and he smiled. "Do you wish me to destroy Vixen?"

"Would you?" Gabrielle questioned, sickened by how truly appealing the proposal was to her.

"She's useful," LaCroix evaded the enquiry with a shrug.

"Why do you take other lovers?"

"To survive," he snapped. "Don't be ridiculous, Gabrielle. You, of all people, understand the nature of our existence."

"I take none to my bed, LaCroix!" she retorted. "Something you know well."

"And if I told you to change that?" he demanded.

Gabrielle knew they were now treading dangerous ground and she eased away from him, fear written in her features as she silently pleaded with him. He remained calmly impassive, watched her. She shook

her head.

"Please, LaCroix."

"Perhaps the change would do you good," he continued, knowing his words would serve only to escalate her fear that he might actually order her to prostitute herself for his amusement.

Gabrielle recoiled visibly and drew her knees up to her chest. She blocked out the sound of his laughter as she rocked herself, and tears flooded her eyes again. Would she never be able to walk away from him, to be in control of her life, as she had once been? Hopeless understanding gave her the answer she didn't really want.

"I will do whatever you wish," she eventually whispered, turning haunted eyes up to the chilling calmness of his look. "Do not make me take others, LaCroix."

"Why does the thought distress you?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

"You know why, damn you!" she said sharply.

"I want you to tell me," he teased, enjoying the conflict of anger and fear that shifted across her features.

Gabrielle considered him for several seconds, then she crawled back to kneel next to him. Unsteady hands rose to touch the white-blond silk of his hair, and she leaned forward to touch his mouth with hers. His arms tightened around her and he lifted her into his lap, settling her legs on either side of his hips. His lips parted and she shivered when his tongue slipped into her mouth with a hunger that shook her to the core of her being.

"You haven't answered me, Gabrielle," he murmured several minutes later. He tugged at the lacy ribbon that served as a tie to her filmy nightgown, and his hands covered the enticing softness of her breasts, to caress silken skin with featherlike touch. She shifted against him, pressed her hips closer to him, and he smiled when her body shuddered in response as his tongue flicked a teasing caress over the straining hardness of one of her nipples.

"I want no one but you," Gabrielle breathed into his ear, her hands pulled at the buttons on his shirt in her eagerness to touch him. It had been much too long since she'd felt LaCroix's body claiming her, possessing all that was within her to give. That loss had been part of the madness that had driven her into self-imposed exile. She craved him as much as the blood that sustained her existence. And LaCroix had denied her repeatedly in recent months, creating a loneliness that threatened her sanity and left her begging for his attention. He'd once told her she would beg for his favour, and she'd laughed. Now, touching him and breathing in the scent that was uniquely him, she felt an elation that would make her hate herself again. Still, that loathing was something she'd learned to tolerate. His absence was not. It was unbearable, and terrifying.

Satisfied and secure in his power over her, LaCroix enjoyed the play of cool, expert fingers caressing him. She never tired of making love to him, and he often wondered if it would have been this way even had she not been blood bound to him. His smile was indulgent as he twisted on the bed and pinned her beneath him. Her legs tangled around his and she pulled his head down into another searing kiss. He could feel the shudders of desire rising within her, and he deepened their oral caress as his mind probed into hers. He needed to know what she'd seen the previous night, and the only time he was able to glimpse her thoughts was when they were together like this. She didn't seem

consciously aware of the weakness he exploited.

LaCroix's hands began a slow, seductive exploration of familiar curves, pushing aside the thin barrier of her nightgown as he sought the places he knew would ignite greater passion in her.

"Tell me about the dream, pet?" he whispered next to her ear, the words so soft they were barely audible.

"Later," she murmured around a gasp of pleasure. "I want you," she breathed like a prayer. "Please, LaCroix?" The words quivered with pleading and urgency. Gabrielle didn't care, not as long as he would let her be this close to him again.

LaCroix repeated the query, this time sending the words directly into her mind as his hand slipped between her parted thighs and began a gentle, stroking intrusion of her body. Gabrielle arched into the touch and a moan of profound hunger escaped her.

Through the fog of near-agonised euphoria that held her, Gabrielle began to feel the mental probe he was exerting. The heavenly rhythm of his touch was matched by an equally intense inner search of her thoughts.

Pain knifed through her heart, then rapidly changed to chilling rage. She couldn't move away from him, she was too effectively pinned beneath the man she had adored from the moment she'd seen him. Now she felt only the bitter insight of betrayal. She went completely still and waited for his eyes to meet hers.

He knew he'd lost his opportunity before she made the choice to stay where she was, the mental door of her mind slammed and shut him out. Repressing a hiss of annoyance, LaCroix casually eased away from her and allowed her to slip off the bed. The depth of her anger was surprising to him, though hardly unexpected. Silence filled the room, the quietness deafening in its own existence. He watched as she walked to the wardrobe and flung it open. He continued to observe as she dressed. The outfit she chose was warning him further of the possibility that he might have miscalculated.

"Where are you going, Gabrielle?" he wondered, his eyes sweeping over her. Stiletto heels, blood red in colour, drew his gaze downward, then his look moved up again, over a black velvet mini skirt, then a lacy bra that matched the heels for rich, scarlet colour and barely contained the soft swell of her breasts. She dropped a velvet and satin trimmed jacket over her shoulders. The coat was almost long enough to cover the skirt and had only two buttons. She fastened them and cuffed the jacket sleeves until pale arms were bared to the elbows. By the time she'd finished dressing, the visible trembling that had wracked her body was no longer evident.

When she ignored his presence and stepped toward the door, LaCroix's irritation resurfaced and he rose. He banged the door solidly back in place before it was opened more than an inch. Gabrielle shrugged, unconcerned, and went to the window. Again he stopped her exit. For several seconds, silence continued to fill the void that had grown between them, then she turned smouldering grey eyes up to meet the ice blue of his impassive gaze.

"Go to hell, LaCroix," she uttered softly. "And take every slut you've ever bedded with you."

"That would mean keeping you with me," he pointed out with a smile that was pure sardonic amusement.

"Not anymore, my love," she promised with a sincerity he could not miss. "Not that it will matter for much longer," she added with a venom

that sprang from unadulterated contempt. Which of them she detested more at the moment was not something she considered as she continued to meet his pale eyes.

"You had best be very careful of your choice of words for the next few minutes, Gabrielle. I am out of patience with you, pet."

"I loathe you, LaCroix," she stated in a low voice. "But, I am no longer afraid of you. You've taken all I had to give, there is nothing left. Certainly not my 'life'," she finished with a sneer that punctuated the loathing she voiced.

"You haven't answered my question," he noted, unaffected by the fury he'd unleashed within her.

"What does it matter?" she spat back. "I'm going out. Perhaps to find someone who wants to share my bed, without the price you put on such pleasure. That should please your amoral sensibilities, darling. You've been making the threat for some time now, after all."

"But you don't want anyone else," he replied with mocking, arrogant assurance. Inside, some tiny quiver of unease woke with the doubt that she might very well do what she claimed she intended. Until that moment, he hadn't known himself that part of what made her such an enigma to him was her devotion. He tormented her with the threat to force her to take other lovers -- the enjoyment that power gave him was muted in the face of what he would feel if she chose to leave him and find solace with someone else.

For a moment, he allowed his mind to skim the memory of her first weeks with him. She never tired of simply looking at him or listening to him. She lived for him and nothing else. He laughed at her often, and never admitted that he basked in the adoration of her love. After the night she'd awakened in this very room and had killed for the first time, she refused to allow the hunger for blood to dictate her actions. She hadn't killed again; she'd take only what she needed to survive. Then she'd turn to LaCroix to satisfy the more intimate hungers within her. Some morbid humour had once made him observe that half the blood she consumed in those early weeks had been his. It wasn't far from the truth. He was her obsession, just as Nicholas had been his for so many centuries.

"I don't want you anymore, LaCroix," she said coldly, sensing the shift of his mood and becoming further enraged by it.

"You belong to me, Gabrielle," he snapped, the chill in his voice was matched in his eyes. "Until I no longer want you, you will remain mine. And mine alone, pet," he concluded. He reached out to run long fingers through the soft flow of her hair, and she flinched away from him with a hiss of disdain.

"I told you once before, I belong to no man. Not even you, Master!" She used the title with a laugh that lit dangerous fires within his beautiful eyes, and somehow the knowledge that she could, in fact, hurt him in some small way made her more rash. "I am no longer interested in being your devoted slave. I've seen how you reward those who are fool enough to give a damn about you."

"You will not leave here, Gabrielle," he assured her. "And you will never leave me."

"Even eternity ends at some point," she said softly. "Your *life* may yet find definition."

LaCroix felt the prick of unwanted knowledge and he grabbed her arms when she would have turned away from him. He caught her gaze with his and for the first time since finding her again, he exerted the full

power of his presence. She managed to withstand the assault for several minutes before closing her eyes in clear pain. Tears of blood trickled from beneath closed lids, and he shook her until she stared up at him again.

"I can destroy you, Gabrielle."

"You won't though," she gasped, still able to cling to a tiny fragment of the defiance he'd thought broken. "Because you need to know the things I see."

"I don't need you -- "

"Then destroy me, you bastard! End this before you make me strike out and give your life to someone else! I can do it, LaCroix," she hissed. "You know it. That's why you're afraid of me right now."

She struck a nerve, some raw, deeply hidden fear that LaCroix, himself, refused to acknowledge. Seeing the glimmer of indecision in his pale sapphire eyes made Gabrielle tremble with a horror he couldn't begin to understand. It vanished so quickly she would never truly be certain she'd glimpsed the weakness. Rage, pure and deadly, lit an inferno behind the blue gaze and quickly turned it to golden fire. Panic made her back up a step, instinctively recoiling from the danger she'd so foolishly provoked. She hit the wall and LaCroix struck before she knew what his intention was.

The vampire's hands buried in the silken thickness of her hair, pulling her head back as his fangs tore into her throat with the careless disregard of a starving wolf. Tiny hands balled into fists against his chest, uselessly attempting to push him away. Her choked cries were a mixture of anguish and fright, then they started to fade. And LaCroix drank, his anger demanded to be sated with her blood, the taste of her filled him with the complexity of their bond. Fear sharpened the sweet wine that flowed from her veins to his, and she eventually slumped against him, no longer conscious. They remained locked in the macabre embrace for minutes that were an infinity.

A small scream of horror finally drew him away from the woman in his arms, and he turned toward the sound. Gabrielle slipped from his grasp, and his eyes narrowed dangerously when he recognised the child gaping back at him, Charity.

Framed in the bedroom doorway, her eyes wide with shock and terror, the girl seemed frozen to the spot. LaCroix filled her vision. His mouth was stained crimson with Gabrielle's blood, and the madness in his eyes assured Charity that the lady was dead, truly dead. She wanted to go to the beautiful woman crumpled on the floor. The barrier of the ancient vampire would not allow her to move. After several seconds, Charity found her voice.

"She said you would not hurt her," she whispered. "She loved you."

LaCroix heard the words, and the tears that were behind them. In some distant part of his mind, he knew this child spoke the truth. His gaze dropped to the body at his feet, and he felt a different kind of anger consume him. Damn her! he hissed silently.

"Get out!" he ordered the girl. When she didn't move, he cast a glare at the child that did make her flee. The door slammed behind her and he turned back to Gabrielle.

LaCroix picked up the lifeless body and brought her back to the bed. He sat next to her and opened his shirt, then quickly tore a gash in his own flesh, just above the heart. When blood spilled from the wound, he gathered her into his arms and guided her mouth to the rich flow. For several seconds there was no response from her, then he felt

the first weak flick of her tongue. He soothed her with soft, encouraging promises and felt her strength begin to gather as she absorbed the gift he was giving her.

Long minutes later, his back arched in sudden pain when she opened her mouth completely and the razor edge of her fangs sank into his chest. A hiss of near anger escaped him, then he let her drink freely. His blood was not enough to give her back the strength he'd taken from her with his attack, but it would save her life.

When he felt the first hint of weakness assailing his body, LaCroix eased her away from him. A small cry of denial was the only objection she made, then she allowed him to settle her back against the pillows. Her eyes closed and LaCroix winced at the raw wound he'd left on her throat. She would not heal completely this time, he knew. The scar would stay to remind her of his assault. He felt a moment of regret, and the words were a hushed breath of air, spoken before he could consciously repress them, "I'm sorry, my pet." The shake of her head was equally minute but the rejection that would have annoyed him earlier now emphasised the hint of remorse that tugged at his heart.

LaCroix kissed her forehead and rose from the bed, the action swift enough that he felt a momentary twinge of disorientation. They both needed to feed properly now.

It was just past midnight when LaCroix reentered the bedroom and saw Charity sitting on the bed, staring at Gabrielle. The auburn-haired vampiress stood at the window, her arms clasped in front of her as if to ward off the cold. She didn't turn when he came into the room, and LaCroix didn't miss the glare Gabrielle's new child cast at him.

"Leave us."

"She does not take orders from you," Gabrielle interjected softly, her voice as lifeless as her eyes when she finally turned to stare at him.

"Don't tempt me to change that, Gabrielle," he warned. As expected, she understood the threat. But to his considerable surprise she merely shrugged and let Charity make her choice.

"There is someone waiting for you, little one," he told her. When suspicion flared again in her large brown eyes, he laughed and nodded to the closed door across the hall. "I think you will like him. His name is Jamie."

Gabrielle's laughter was brittle and alien sounding. "Yes, Charity, he's probably brought you your best friend for dinner."

Two pairs of eyes watched her, both registering different kinds of surprise. The girl slid off the bed and quietly left the room. LaCroix maintained the silence for several minutes, then followed Gabrielle when she walked out of the room and headed for the library.

"You saw my death, didn't you?" LaCroix asked a long while after they had settled on opposite sides of the room.

Gabrielle ignored him. Her mind was crowded with images that ranged from passionate to terrifying. All the memories centred on the man who was the key to her entire existence. She had loved him so completely. He had felt nothing for her. Even now, she wanted to

believe otherwise but couldn't. He'd almost killed her tonight. In a fit of anger, LaCroix had almost succeeded in destroying her -- in doing the very thing she'd asked of him the night she'd awakened to this insanity and many times since. Why, when he had achieved that goal, had he brought her back yet again?

"Is that why you felt the need to bring me back to this hell?" she wondered, finally expressed the single thought that had haunted her all evening. "You still require my vision to search for Nick?"

LaCroix allowed the bitter question to go unanswered. He waited for her to decide where the conversation would go next. For the first time in decades, his quest to reclaim Nicholas was of secondary importance to him.

"We are quite a match, are we not, bien-aimé?" she asked with a sardonic smile. The hardness in her voice was reflected in her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, Gabrielle felt hollow and spent. "You have lived thousands of years, and I have known many lifetimes, yet we have nothing." She held his eyes with her look and all that she felt in the contact was further emptiness. He refused to answer her, and she knew he was waiting for her to voice the things that had been growing between them for so long. She sighed wearily and walked to the window; the beauty of the gardens offered no comfort tonight.

"I spent this lifetime alone, LaCroix. Always searching for something I could never define, let alone recognise. I filled my world with people who couldn't touch me inside. I did the things that were asked of me, and tried to give others the comfort I found so elusive. I don't think I was an entirely evil person at any point. Yet, here I am. More alone since finding you that I ever was before. I have killed because you made me into this thing I've learned to hate. I've destroyed people I once loved. And I have begged you to love me when that is a thing you are not capable of giving. All this, because I feared my aloneness."

Again, he offered no comment, only the silent regard of cool blue eyes.

"But all is not lost, is it, my love?" She laughed and the mocking sound was as devoid of warmth as her manner. "We do have one thing. We each have our obsessions. You have your dream of the shining, perfect Knight you have lost. And, I have my equally insane dream of you. Perhaps, that's all there ever was to be had. I hate to think we have even that in common, for you are a monster, and I adore you in spite of that. Which makes me as mad as you are, LaCroix."

"Gabrielle."

She whirled at the soft whisper of her name, and suddenly there was a hatred in her expression that actually surprised LaCroix.

"I thought I would die of loneliness when I lived without knowing you," she charged. "Then you taught me what true loneliness was, when you would leave me here to wait for you, while you found others to entertain you. Not that your recent acquisitions are worth my anger, of course. Your taste appears to be slipping, LaCroix," she sneered in barely contained wrath.

"Nicholas knew you for what you are," she continued after a heavy pause. "I hope you hurt for want of him, LaCroix. I hope every moment teaches you what you've done to me. You want him to ease your loneliness, to share your world. You're a fool! You are empty because you drove him away, damn you! You never gave me that choice."

"Nicholas belongs to me," LaCroix stated flatly.

"So do I!" she hissed with rage. She went back to the couch and dropped into a seat there, suddenly as empty of strength as she was of feeling. When she looked at him again, all she saw was the face she had grown to love more than her own life.

"If you confront him, LaCroix, he'll destroy you."

Once the words had been uttered, Gabrielle felt the wall of indifference collapse around her. The dream came back to her, surged into the forefront of her mind, as vivid and horrible as it had been the first time she'd seen it. As always, the devastation of losing LaCroix overwhelmed her. She started to tremble, and shook her head unconsciously, desperate to push away the dreadful images. "Nicholas will kill you," she told him, grey eyes huge with the unimaginable possibility of that truth.

Finally, LaCroix rose and went to kneel in front of her. He took her hands in his and bent his head over them. Gabrielle stared down at the fair head and she gently disentangled one of her hands. Shaking fingers brushed over the fine, silver-white hair, then she eased his head away and slipped down to the floor with him. LaCroix's blue eyes held hers, mesmerising and alive with the alluring power that defined his being. Yet, he hesitated to move or speak.

"I cannot bear to live without you." Gabrielle finally dared to break the oppressive silence and her voice shook with the depth of passion and love she felt for him. "I wish I could truly hate you. It would make so many things easier."

"You have never taken the easy approach to anything, Gabrielle," he whispered softly. "I don't want your hate, pet."

"You don't want my love, either," she reminded him.

"I thrive on your love, Gabrielle," he admitted for the first time.

"Then why do you push me away?"

The quiet note of demand startled him, and he met the smoky gaze with an honesty he was not accustomed to. "Because I enjoy you too much."

"I will **never** leave you," she reassured him, sensing the true reason behind his refusal to accept her without question. "You have tried to drive me away yet I remain at your side. What do I have to do to prove that I am yours?"

"Still?" he wondered, one eyebrow curved into an arch of scepticism. "I almost killed you."

Gabrielle actually laughed at that, but the sound was low and filled with genuine warmth and amusement.

"I didn't hate you the first two times you did that."

Before he could do more than smile she settled more firmly on the floor and her head fell back to the seat of the couch. Her arms crossed over her mid-section again, and LaCroix recognised the cause of her discomfort. He rose and went to the bar that dominated the darkest corner of the spacious old room. He returned a moment later and handed her a large wine goblet, filled with the thick, rich blood she needed.

"You should hunt," he commented once she'd drained two of the glasses.

"Tomorrow," she said absently.

He let it go.

"Where is she?" Gabrielle asked a long while later. LaCroix still sat next to her, but he had made no move to touch her. She could not bring herself to ask for the thing she wanted most. Once it had been a game, he forced her to voice her desires before he would fulfill them.

Tonight, after all that had happened, she no longer dared to risk his rebuff. Sadness filled her and she turned away without giving him time to answer her question.

LaCroix felt the gulf of despair that swallowed her and he sighed inwardly. She meant Vixen, of course. Until that moment, LaCroix had forgotten about the young woman who had claimed his attention so often recently. Memory taunted him, and he let his mind wander with the twists and turns of the whimsy. He'd found the girl in *The Vampyr's Crypt*, and she'd immediately been drawn to him. She was brash, bizarre, and far too filled with the certainty of her importance. She was also completely without conscience and had an instinct for survival that didn't allow her to consider anyone's needs more vital than her own. Stripping her of that vanity had been amusing for a time. She was more primitive than passionate in her approach to sex, and that, too, had been amusing for a time. A short time, he now conceded. The pale, insolent, punk bitch was not Gabrielle, in any way. And, LaCroix was discovering he did indeed, value his lady.

"Gabrielle?"

"No," she murmured softly, pain and defeat in her voice. "No more. I can't, LaCroix. You've won. I will not fight for your love, nor will I beg. Do as you will, as you have always done."

LaCroix's fingers touched her chin and tilted her face up to meet his kiss. She accepted his touch without response for several seconds, then her lips parted to the experimental probe of his tongue. The gentleness in her woke a protectiveness that had been long dormant inside the master vampire, and he deepened the caress with loving care, drawing her into the abandoned shelter of his heart. Slowly, Gabrielle's arms encircled his neck, and with a tiny sigh she melted completely into his embrace.

Their love-making would last hours this night, binding the lovely psychic to the ancient vampire more completely than she had ever before been. For a time, LaCroix even forgot Nicholas as he basked in Gabrielle's love and commitment to him.

Gabrielle struggled up through the incredible weight of sleep, desperate to escape the images that chased her in the gruesome dreamscape of her mind. The vision distorted and changed, spinning away from her, then swooping in on her with the lethal grace of a bird of prey. She saw his face, changed into something she hardly recognised. Blue eyes blazed with tormented hunger, and fangs gleamed in the impossible radiance of sunshine. The blinding light faded to soothing darkness, but it offered no respite. She spasmed against bonds she couldn't free herself from, and the sensation of bullets tearing into her flesh made her writhe in agonised pain. As the dream slipped away, she saw the Tower looming in the distance, then the familiar boundaries of the library solidified around her.

LaCroix held her until the shaking subsided, then he turned her face up to meet his stare. He asked no question, merely waited for her to speak. It took much longer than it should have, and he suspected she was making a conscious choice about whether or not to tell him what had frightened her into wakefulness in the middle of the day.

"He's in Toronto," Gabrielle eventually whispered, still trembling with the aftermath of the vision. "He was shot."

"Badly?"

"I think he will be fine. He's in great pain, LaCroix."

"You said he wasn't badly hurt," he repeated with a frown.

"His pain is within him," she answered.

"Are you sure it's Toronto?"

She reached back, saw the blinking lights of the tall, slender building that was unmistakable -- the CN Tower, one of the most recognisable landmarks in the world. She turned in his arms, and snuggled closer to him, sighing softly when LaCroix's embrace tightened around her. She kissed his neck, her tongue lingered in a teasing caress. "Nicholas is in Toronto, LaCroix." For a second, she thought he hadn't heard her, then his triumphant pleasure caught her mind, and swept her into his mood. When he bent to cover her mouth with his, Gabrielle met him with the fierce hunger of passion and reaffirmed love.

OCTOBER, 5th, 1990: TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA ---

LaCroix's rich, sensuous voice drifted over the airwaves as Gabrielle continued to watch him from across the room. Of all the guises she had seen him wear throughout their time together, this one was easily the most alien to her. The neon station call letters glowed in the darkened studio, CERK 490AM, and the *Night Crawler* seduced his eager audience with the hypnotic spell of his power. She hardly recognised this creature as the brilliant, sophisticated, superbly controlled lover she adored. Yet LaCroix appeared to be having a wonderful time. He signed off with his customary taunt to Nicholas, carefully veiled and elusive. Then he rose and they left the station minutes later.

"You're much too quiet, Gabrielle," he noted as they walked the still, pre-dawn streets of the city.

"Why must you confront him, LaCroix?"

LaCroix's answering laughter was cold, and she saw again an increasingly familiar look in his eyes. It created a shiver of fear within her; since their arrival, his eyes had frequently filled with the distinct glint of madness. He turned to her and stopped their movement. A light caress to her cheek brought smoke coloured eyes back to meet his sharp gaze.

"Nicholas is mine, pet. I want him back."

She nodded, apprehension filled her mood as it had from the moment she had located Nick in her dreams. Death hovered over them and LaCroix was immune to the vulture. His obsession had consumed him.

"At what price, my love?" she murmured.

"At any price, Gabrielle," he said softly. "How much longer?"

"Soon," she answered, and a visible shudder went through her. "Janette is here, too, LaCroix," she informed him. "She owns a nightclub."

LaCroix's interest was evident, and he waited for her to supply him with the last piece of information.

"The Raven."

He felt her reluctance to give him the name of the club. Irritated, he turned away from her.

"I don't want to watch you die, LaCroix," she called after him, her voice quiet and layered with emotion. "I'm afraid."

"Then go back to Victoria and wait for me to bring them both to

you," he suggested without looking back.

It was an appealing idea, she thought. Charity was now the sole resident of the Sheraton mansion. She missed the girl. And Eric would welcome her back. Unconsciously, she shook her head and dismissed the beckoning thought. She glanced up and was startled to see that LaCroix had halted his retreat. He watched her from a few feet away, and the fury in his eyes was mute testimony that her thoughts had been read. When he held out his hand, she smiled and accepted it, her fingers clasped his tightly.

"I told you once that I would never leave you," she said, catching his other hand with hers. "If you die here, LaCroix, what reason would I have to continue my life?"

"I have no intention of dying here, my pet," he whispered. He released her hands and pulled her close to him, moulding her soft, slender body to the long length of his. They must have made a strikingly odd couple, he mused, as his hands caressed her through the silk and velvet she preferred to wear. His present punk garb had been a shock to her the first time she'd seen it. LaCroix felt the rage of this bizarre sub-culture was the perfect backdrop for his quest. He embraced the unleashed anger of the youth he emulated. Gabrielle, as always, remained the ethereal lover who served him in any visage he adopted.

"I have no intention of allowing you to die here . . . Master," she purred into his ear. "I will destroy Nicholas myself before I let him take you from me." Her obsession had consumed her.

LaCroix smiled at the low, contained intensity of her words. He had no doubts about her sincerity. She had decidedly mixed emotions about Knight, partially due to her own fragmented memories, he knew. It didn't help Nick's case any that LaCroix had fed her half-truths and his own anger toward his errant child.

Putting thoughts of Nicholas out of his mind, LaCroix focused his attention on the woman in front of him. He lifted her face to his and caught her mouth in a kiss that promised they would not sleep for several hours yet. Minutes later, Gabrielle stepped away from him, her eyes alive with desire. LaCroix nodded, and they rose. Home was not far from the small underground radio station, and his anxiousness to return there suddenly had very little to do with the approaching sunrise.



FENRIS
HOUSE

A Division of SPECIAL SERVICES, Unlimited